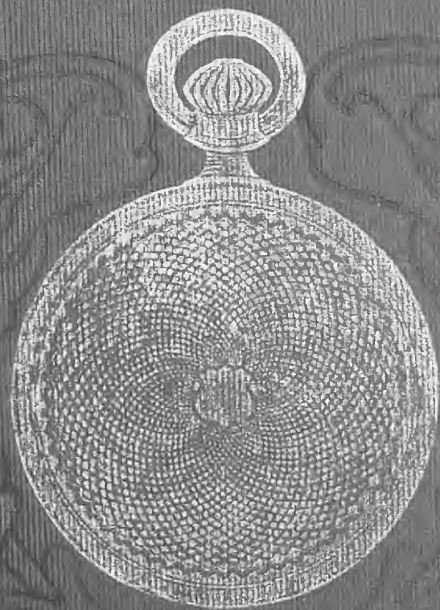


DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH



"PANSY"



"Oh, yes, I'll hold her," David Ransom said.—*See page 140.*

DAVID
RANSOM'S
WATCH

By PANSY

(MRS. G. R. ALDEN)

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VOCATION," ETC.

ILLUSTRATED

BOSTON
LOTHROP, LEE & SHEPARD CO.

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Contents.

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. The One Exception	9
II. The Outlook	22
III. Revelations	34
IV. "Dave"	46
V. The Man who was Bored	58
VI. Opportunity	71
VII. A Look Backward	83
VIII. Harlan	95
IX. "On Good Ground"	108
X. An Interrupted Story	121
XI. A Marked Day	134
XII. A Home-coming	148
XIII. "I have let it go"	160
XIV. Miss Hannah's Champion	172
XV. Unrest	184
XVI. New Light	196
XVII. "Mr. Harlan"	208

CHAPTER		PAGE
XVIII.	“The Child”	220
XIX.	“Some Things stay Settled”	232
XX.	A “Sign”	243
XXI.	“Fitting Things Together”	256
XXII.	He “Let Things Go”	268
XXIII.	“Listen !”	280
XXIV.	“That short, potential stir That each can make but once”	293
XXV.	Social Problems	304
XXVI.	“What’s in a Name ?”	316
XXVII.	Wasted Sympathy	328
XXVIII.	Foreign, and Home	339

Illustrations.

“ Oh, yes, I’ll hold her,” David Ransom said *Frontispiece*

PAGE

“ Let me put them in better shape to be carried ” . 16

The length of the letter amazed him . . . 159

“ Now, daddy dear, I’m going to be real serious ” . 247

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH

David Ransom's Watch.

I.

THE ONE EXCEPTION.

MISS HANNAH STERNS stood before the sideboard in her father's dining room engaged in what she mentally called,—setting things to rights. She had been absent from home for nearly three months, an unprecedented experience with her, and during that time there had been innovations. The silver water-cooler that had always stood at the right-hand corner was now at the left; and the handsome old-fashioned silver cake basket, which should occupy the centre, was pushed quite to one side to make room for a pert little fruit dish of modern shape. Miss Hannah carefully rearranged everything, but felt indulgent toward the disorder. Mrs. Austin, careful housekeeper as she was, had undoubtedly done very well during the methodical daughter's absence; the house looked better than could have been expected, although of course there

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

were many minor details to be looked after now that the real mistress had returned. She was enjoying the work of restoring it to exact order.

The sideboard drawers gave her the most of a shock. Grandmother's solid silver dessert spoons, more than a hundred years old, tumbling about with modern ones!

"That must be some of Lucy's doings!" was Miss Sterns's mental exclamation. "Mrs. Austin would never have allowed it, and Miranda would have known better. That girl doesn't look to me as though she had mind enough to think of much besides her pretty face with its silly little curls. If I keep her, she will have to put those curls out of sight, at least while she is around the kitchen. Curls and cooking don't go well together in my opinion."

As these thoughts floated through her mind, she glanced complacently at the reflection of herself in the sideboard mirror. Everything about her could undoubtedly be said to "go well together." She was in the neatest of morning costumes; a gray-and-white print dress with the gray predominating, made with severe plainness, as in her opinion a house-keeper's morning dress should be. It was just short enough to clear the floor and give glimpses of her strong, well-fitting shoes. Her abundant hair, of so dark a brown as to be almost worthy

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

of being called black, was drawn neatly back from her face and so carefully confined by pins that a stray lock was impossible. In the matter of dress as in other ways Miss Sterns was a strong contrast to Lucy.

The young woman who bore that name was just then engaged in sweeping the broad tree-lined path that led from the side porch to the gate. It was strewn with autumn leaves of brilliant tint, and the rosy-cheeked girl who swept had adorned herself with them. A spray of vivid crimson glowed among her curls, and a massive bunch of yellow-browns and crimsons skilfully mixed was thrust into her belt.

"The girl has an eye to effect," commented Miss Sterns, turning for a moment from the sideboard to watch the sweeper. "She is a pretty creature, too pretty and too silly I am afraid for this dangerous world. Lace-trimmed sleeves for the kitchen, and not even an apron to protect a dress that is much too light for her work! What kind of a mother can the child have had?"

The woman's face grew thoughtful as she looked. A sense of personal responsibility for that young unprotected life shadowed her thought. She shrank a little from it; her life had been so full of responsibilities and heavier cares than usually came to girlhood; she felt as though there ought to be a respite. Must she begin to think of and plan for Lucy Ward?

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

She recurred mentally to her father's letter received a few weeks before.

"Mrs. Austin has imported a pretty country lass, named Lucy, to help her while Miranda is away. She is a wholesome-looking little thing and seems to be capable. I am wondering if it will not be wise for us to keep her after Miranda's return? She has been recently orphaned, I understand, and is rather alone in the world. She might be in training for the time when you leave us permanently; your grandmother seems to take to her. But you will attend to all this when you come."

Miss Hannah's face grew graver still as she recalled that phrase—"the time when you leave us permanently." She had hours when it seemed cruel and traitorous in her to be planning to leave the father and grandmother who had been her charge for so many years. She had been just sixteen when, with her head bent low over her mother's pillow, she had listened to the murmured words of the failing voice: "I am leaving you two treasures, my daughter,—your blessed father and my own dear mother. Your father, especially, will look to you for help and comfort. Promise me, dear, that you will always put him first."

She remembered distinctly how she had choked back the tears and kept a firm grip on her trembling nerves and answered steadily:—

"I will do my best, mother, my very best."

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

The years had passed, and now Hannah Sterns, who had been since that sixteenth birthday the sole earthly comfort of father and grandmother, was thirty-one. Never for an hour had she swerved from her trust.

There had been a boy friend whom the girl, Hannah, had well liked, but when, at twenty-one, he confided to her his desire and determination to become not only a minister of the gospel but a missionary to China, Hannah had sat alone for an hour looking steadily through the moonlight over in the direction of the gleaming marble that marked her mother's grave. At last she had said aloud, and steadily : "I never will, mother, never. You need not be afraid."

So the boy who had dreamed of her all through his dawning manhood went to China without her, and she had been his good home friend through the years, knowing a little more about his mission station than any other, and always being interested to receive missionary letters from him and his good wife.

There had been other friends: one, who had gone to the far west to seek his fortune, and would have been glad to take Hannah Sterns with him to help him find it, but she was firm. By that time "father" was past fifty, too old to be uprooted from the old home and seek a new one with her, not to mention grandmother, who was feeble and had never travelled.

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

The father had not dreamed of these sacrifices in his behalf, if sacrifices they really were. Hannah Sterns herself had not so named them. She had taken these matters in hand so early that they had not fully taken root in her heart. She had felt so sure where her duty was — yes, and her privilege — that it had all been treated as a matter of course. Yet at thirty-one that father, now past sixty, was writing to her about the time when she should “leave home permanently.” Still, this time it was very different from going to China, or the far west. The city that was to be her future home was but twenty miles distant, by rail. There would be nothing to hinder her from coming out every week, twice a week if necessary, to look after the comfort of father and grandmother. Moreover, she assured herself that neither of them was so very old. Grandmother at seventy-five seemed younger to her than the woman of sixty had seemed to the girl of sixteen, while father at sixty was really just in his prime. It is true he would not listen to her suggestion that he rent the farm and live in town, but he had promised to be a constant visitor; and through the long summers of course they would all be together at the old farmhouse. Oh, no one could say that Hannah Sterns was abandoning her trust, yet the shadow always crept over her face at thought of the changes.

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

Other people said very pleasant things of Miss Hannah, as she had come to be called in the neighborhood. It was very generally conceded that no girl had ever given herself more royally to a father than she had done. Through her busy school days she had steadily resisted the urgings of her classmates to board in town, and all through the cold winter mornings had risen early to catch the train, sometimes, even when the roads were bad, tramping the mile that lay between her and the village station, declining invitations to remain in town over night to certain functions, on the plea that she did not like to leave father alone through the long evenings.

When school days were over, the young woman had developed into a notable house-keeper. So noted were her attainments in this direction that when Miss Hobson, who had been trained by Hannah's own mother, yielded to the entreaties of a neighboring farmer and promised to become Mrs. Austin, she explained volubly to any who would listen:—

"I couldn't ever have done it in the world if it wa'n't that Hannah can do every bit as well by 'em now as I can myself."

She had been right. The time came when even Mrs. Austin owned that Hannah could "do better by them" than she could herself.

It was Ben Ransom who had planned successfully to change all this. Life was never

quite the same to Hannah Sterns after that morning when, on her way home from town carrying many purchases tied in so awkward a bundle that the string broke and scattered them, a long-limbed man had vaulted over the fence that separated the road from the pine grove, and with lifted hat and winsome smile had hurried to her aid.

"Let me put them in better shape to be carried," he had said as he captured them. "It is Miss Sterns, is it not? I am Ben Ransom of the firm of Wilcox and Harter, and I ought to hurry back and have the boy discharged who made up so clumsy a package for you. I have seen you several times at our store."

This he seemed to consider sufficient introduction to enable him to chat gayly with her while he skilfully arranged the packages, deploring the fact that he could not collect the sugar, which had burst its bounds and spread itself over the road.

"The street will be sweetened instead of my cake," said Miss Sterns, laughing genially. By that time Mr. Ransom was walking beside her, taking charge of the package himself.

"I hope you will let me," he said. "This is a legal holiday, you know, and our store is to close at eleven for the day, so they did not need my valuable services. I am too new at the business to be missed, and too new in the



" Let me put them in better shape to be carried."

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

town to appreciate a holiday. Perhaps you know nothing about how dreary a thing a holiday can be to a fellow a thousand miles away from all his friends? I was trying to kill time by a tramp into the country when I saw your dilemma. I hope you will forgive me for looking upon the mishap as a special interposition of Providence in my behalf."

He had resisted the temptation to say to her, when she spoke of the sugar, something about her sweetening the path on which she trod without the aid of sugar, as he knew he should have done if she had been years younger; and had kept himself carefully from all kindred blunders during that walk to the Sterns farm, and succeeded in awakening Miss Sterns's hearty sympathy for his loneliness. She had heard of the new clerk at Wilcox and Harter's, and had heard only good of him. There was no reason why she should not meet halfway his evident desire for friendliness. The acquaintance thus begun sprang rapidly into friendship. Ben Ransom, having been introduced to Mr. Sterns and cordially invited to the farm-house, lost no time in availing himself of its hospitality. He tramped out almost daily after business hours were over, frankly admitting that the Sterns library was a magnet that it seemed impossible to resist. He had brought few books with him, which was fortunate, he told them, as his boarding-house accommodations were not spa-

cious enough to admit of their society. After a little he told Miss Sterns that if she had to depend upon his fellow-clerks and boarding-house acquaintances for society during a single week, she would understand as no words of his could picture it what an oasis in his desert her home was.

Miss Sterns began by being sorry for the young man in his loneliness, and ended by heartily liking him and enjoying his company. At least she thought that was the end. No one was more astonished than herself at the discovery that it went much farther. When Ben Ransom asked her in so many words to be his wife, she was at first as much dismayed over the throbbing of her own heart as she was over his unexpected appeal. What was this strange new feeling that had taken hold of her like a master? It was very different from that calm spirit of renunciation with which she had turned away from the boy who went to China, and quite unlike the dignified putting aside of the older man who went west. For a while Hannah Sterns did not understand it. But she resisted it bravely, and spoke to Ben Ransom almost sharply.

"The idea! How could you be so insane as to think of such a thing for a moment?"

He met her with skilful words.

"I know, Hannah; I know every word you and other people can say, — that I am far be-

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

neath you in position and education and money and everything else, but —” Of course she had to interrupt him.

“Oh, ‘position’ and ‘money’! Why do you want to be absurd by naming such things between us?”

He went on as though she had not spoken.

“But in spite of all that, I can’t get away from the feeling that you were meant for me and for no one else in all the world, and that I am the one who can make you happy.”

She was glad that he could not see how instantly her heart responded to such words. She hid her heart and spoke calmly.

“It is absurd, Benjamin, and you ought to know it. You have mistaken a cordial friendship for something stronger. You should not forget even for a moment that you are speaking to a woman who is seven years older than yourself, and who is sane enough to prevent you from sacrificing your youth to her, even though you are willing to do it.”

“What are years?” he said in lofty scorn. “Some people are younger at thirty than others are at sixteen. And some men are old at twenty-four. There are times when I feel myself to be a dozen years older than you. But I do not believe in making mathematical demonstrations about such matters. Our hearts are of the same age, Hannah; I don’t believe you can deny it. I am going to brave everything

and declare that I believe you love me even as I do you."

He had his way. Not easily ; the woman in her held out long. She made him go over the ground again and again. She obliged him to look forward to the time when she would be a gray-haired woman of fifty, and quoted as much older than that, as women under such circumstances generally were, while he would be spoken of as a man of about forty, just in his prime.

For a while he was very patient with her objections and steady in his tenderness. Then he tried a little irritability.

"Oh, if you are going to bring all the world in between us to discuss our affairs for us, and be guided by what they will say, I may as well stop trying to argue. But I cannot think that I am to you in the slightest degree what you are to me, else you would be willing to brave the opinions of all the world without giving them a second thought. This, at least, is a matter which each individual has a right to decide for himself."

And at last he prevailed. Hannah Sterns allowed herself to be convinced that to her had come the exception which but served to prove the general rule of common sense.

According to the fashion of her time, she permitted the discreet whisper to pass among her very intimate friends that there was an engage-

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

ment of marriage between her and young Ransom, the favorite new clerk at Wilcox and Harter's.

That popular firm celebrated the event by transferring the successful clerk to their city store, and placing him at the head of one of the departments. This, to his intense satisfaction. He explained to Hannah that he might better come twenty miles by train than tramp in all weathers the one mile that had separated them; and when he was not at the farm, he would rather be in town.

II.

THE OUTLOOK.

AFTER this, the Sterns household set out to reconstruct itself and grow used to thinking about changed conditions. Perhaps the faithful "help," Miranda, felt the change as much as any of them. She began to be allowed to assume fresh responsibilities, and attempt delicate tasks heretofore trusted to none but Hannah. She heard daily, sometimes several times a day, little lectures which began with the impressive words:—

"Miranda, when you are here alone, you will need to remember—" or some kindred phrase that foreshadowed solemn trusts. All the time Hannah's mind seemed to be occupied with schemes intended to add to the comfort of her father and grandmother, and make them feel her absence as little as possible. The stricture at her heart which she felt whenever she thought of leaving her charge in the hands of aliens she hid away even from Ben Ransom; especially after she discovered that he was almost disposed to resent it as an indication that

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

she cared more for her father and grandmother than for him.

It was a feeling that she must begin to try to get used to the changes that had helped to reconcile her to that preliminary three months of absence from the farm.

A friend of her girlhood, to whom she had given the love that she would have bestowed upon a sister, fell into invalidism and was ordered to a mountain resort for the summer. A pitiful appeal to Hannah Sterns to accompany her into what she was pleased to call "exile," backed by the mother who could not leave her invalid husband to attend her child, came at a time when Hannah was trying to convince herself that it would be possible for her father to get on with her away, and seemed to her a Providential opportunity to try what life at the farm would be without her.

At the last minute, however, she had summoned Mrs. Austin from her own home cares to act as housekeeper, her heart having failed her with regard to Miranda. They had all borne it very well, especially Miranda, who had embraced the opportunity to make a long-promised visit to her married sister, and to install the pretty-faced girl, Lucy, to serve as helper to Mrs. Austin.

"She's a silly little thing," Mrs. Austin explained to Hannah when, on the evening of her return, two days earlier than she had been

expected, that good woman gave an account of her stewardship.

"A bit vain of her red cheeks and bright eyes, you know, and all that sort of thing. But she'll get over that, and she is handy and spry and quick to catch on to new ideas. I should keep her if I were you. Miranda needs some one—a body does when they are left here alone, you know how it is yourself; often your pa or your grandma wants a little waiting on when you can't leave, nohow. Not but what Miranda does well; I do say for it, Miss Hannah, she does you credit. When my Tommy took sick that week and I just *had* to go home, I rode out here every blessed day but one to see how things were going, and everything was in that order that I wouldn't have known but I was here myself. You can trust Miranda every time, and I know it will be a comfort to you to have me say so. And Lucy will work into a real good runabout for her; your pa thinks so, too, and the old lady takes to her first-rate. Oh, you'll be fixed as fine as a fiddle, Miss Hannah, and needn't to worry a mite about going away for good."

Hannah's heart caught at that last phrase. She hoped and prayed every day on her knees that her going away might be "for good" to them all. Nevertheless, she knew that she was very glad indeed to be at home. The mountains were very well, and Emily Bennett had

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

without doubt gained faster under her watchful care than she could have done without her, but when the tall chimneys of the old farm rose on her vision as she rode from the station in the depot wagon, earlier by two days than she was expected, the sense of home and loved ones to whose highest comfort she was essential possessed and thrilled her. She knew in her inmost heart that by no means all the gladness was due to the fact that she was now only twenty miles removed from Ben Ransom, and she was distinctly glad that the day set for the final wrench from home was still months away.

The sideboard being finally reconstructed to her mind, Miss Sterns turned again to the window, and the view she had, that time, brought a rich glow to her face and a new light to her eyes. There, by the side gate, looking down upon the leaves that Lucy had swept into a gorgeous heap, was Ben Ransom.

"How could he possibly have heard so soon?" was Hannah's thought.

"Or, perhaps he doesn't know I am here, and has come out in the goodness of his heart to see father and grandmother. It must be that; he simply *can't* have received the note that I mailed this morning. He probably has a business call to make in this direction and has seized the opportunity to look in on father; it would be like him."

She walked quickly toward the sideboard

glass and took a swift survey of herself from a new standpoint. She decided that she looked very well. She was certainly not in evening dress, but Ben must get used to seeing her in working trim. The light in her eyes over this thought and its suggestions was pleasant to see; it made her look younger and prettier; though "pretty" was not the word to apply usually to a face like Miss Sterns's.

She returned to the south window. It commanded a view of the side porch and the door which opened into the family sitting room. If their guest meant to enter by that door, as he had a friendly way of doing, it would give her a chance to see the first look on his face when father told him she was at home.

But Ben had not yet reached the porch. He had followed Lucy back over the just swept walk. Both were laughing and the girl's cheeks had grown a deeper red. She was apparently being accused of not sweeping clean, as the wind had already strewn more leaves over the path. The young man took the broom from her hand and was making vigorous strokes with it while she looked on and laughed.

"She is a trifle too familiar in her manner for a respectable girl," commented Miss Hannah. "I suppose the child has never been trained in the proprieties, and Benjamin cannot help but be kind and friendly with everybody."

She knew, however, that she would, before

long, contrive a way to give him a gentle caution to the effect that Lucy was young and ignorant and silly.

They had stopped sweeping now and stood under the great elm together, apparently engaged in examining closely a deeply veined autumn leaf that glowed against Lucy's light dress. She was very young, and undoubtedly very silly. She had forgotten for the moment that Miss Hannah was at home. Had she thought of it, she would have believed that father and daughter were together in the sitting room where she had left them going over accounts, and the elm tree could not be seen from the sitting-room windows. But the great square window in the dining room commanded a full view. Miss Hannah's eyes could see far and well. The sight she saw under the elm tree photographed itself on her memory.

Ben Ransom took the broom again, and leaning on it as a staff put his free arm about Lucy's unresisting waist, and, bending, kissed her full upon her red lips, not once only, nor twice.

For a full fascinated minute Hannah Sterns stood looking. Then she turned and went swiftly across the room through the kitchen to the back stairway from which she could make her way to her own room, which she entered, closing and locking the door after her.

"Oh, you horrid man!" giggled Lucy, mak-

ing a feint of slipping from the embrace of the firm arm. "What do you suppose Miss Sterns would think if she could see you? Maybe she can. She might be in the dining room this minute, looking out of the window."

Lucy's tone was free from apprehension. She believed, she was sure, that Miss Sterns was still with her father; but Ben Ransom gave a little start and glanced up at the window as he removed his arm. In an instant he had recovered himself and was laughing.

"How can you find it in your wicked little heart to startle a fellow so?" he asked. "You don't think that even Miss Sterns can reach two or three hundred miles with her eyes, do you? I shall need a half dozen more kisses to pay for the shock you gave me."

Lucy giggled again, but twitched herself away from his hand. "No, you shan't," she said positively. "I'm not going to run any more risks. I can behave before folks if you can't. And you are awfully mistaken about Miss Hannah. She is no three hundred miles away. She got home last night by the late train, and came up in the depot wagon. They didn't know she was coming till to-morrow, but she's here all the same, and I don't know but she's in the dining room this minute looking at you."

She was not prepared for the sudden change which this information wrought in the young man's face and manner.

There was an angry light in his eyes such as she had never seen there before, and he seized the girl's arm almost roughly as he said:—

"Look here, what do you mean? If you are fooling me, you shall pay for it. Is Miss Sterns at home?"

"Of course she is," said Lucy, half crying. "Didn't I tell you she come unexpected last night? They didn't send for her nor anything. She come up in Bill Johnson's express wagon."

"Why didn't you tell me before?" His tone was still fierce, and unconsciously his grip on Lucy's arm tightened.

"Leave go of me," said Lucy, indignation mingling with her dismay. "Why should I tell you? How was I going to know that you cared when she got home? Leave go of my arm, I say; you hurt! I don't think you are a bit nice, so there!"

Then a sudden thought struck her and she hastened to reassure him. "Say, Ben, she ain't in the dining room; I was just in fun then. Do you s'pose I'd have let you kiss me if that old maid had been looking on; she would have thought we was both awful. She's in the sittin' room with her father making him go over all the accounts since she's been away. They say she keeps the money and lets him have a little to spend once in a while."

Lucy was giggling again. She thought she had fathomed the reason for her admirer's excitement. But the young man's only answer was to give what Lucy, when she thought of it afterwards, called "a kind of snort," as he dropped her arm with such suddenness as almost to set her off her feet, and strode toward the house. His uppermost thought was that he must find out at once whether his folly had wrought him mischief.

"Bless me!" said Mr. Sterns, bustling about to receive his caller and free an easy-chair from the newspapers that he had strewn around the room. "This is an unexpected pleasure, at this hour of the day. What little bird told you that the mountains had given us back our treasure?"

"News travels fast in the country, you know," said Ben Ransom, picking up the old gentleman's handkerchief and spectacle case, and insisting upon his reseating himself in his favorite arm-chair. "So Hannah stole a march on us? What happened that she changed her plans and prevented our meeting her in the style we intended? She was not ill, I hope?"

"Oh, no, never looked better; and glad to be at home. They found friends who were coming this way, and changed their plans at the last minute to travel together. Where is Hannah, I wonder? Lucy!" Stepping to

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

the open window, he raised his voice, and the girl, Lucy, still red of face and with eyes that suggested timidity, answered her employer's call and stood waiting.

"Find Miss Hannah, won't you, and tell her Mr. Ransom is here. I'll not need to tell her to hurry, after that." The latter part of the sentence was for Ben Ransom, for Lucy had sped away.

But Hannah was evidently not in haste; the two men waited, and talked over the latest news and the business conditions as affected by the morning paper, and fidgeted, at least Ben Ransom did, from the old-fashioned luxurious lounge to the old-fashioned rocking-chair and back again, taking in the window and the outside view in his transit. At last the father spoke his thought.

"What in the world can have become of Hannah? I thought she would fly when she heard of you being here. That is the way girls used to do in my day; but the fashions are changed, I suppose, with the times."

Ben Ransom laughed absent-mindedly and listened for sounds of approaching footsteps. Some one was coming; it was Lucy, still looking startled and scared. She did not glance at the guest, but stood before her employer speaking rapidly.

"Miss Hannah says will you please to excuse her to company this morning, Mr. Sterns;

she is busy about something that is that particular that she can't get away." Lucy's English had been acquired without the slightest regard to style.

"What is that?" asked Mr. Sterns, in unbounded astonishment. "Busy about something; why, she was here not ten minutes ago going over accounts with me; we were interrupted by Bennett, who wanted to see me on some business, and she said she would come back as soon as he left."

This explanation he gave to his guest, then turned again to Lucy.

"Did you tell her who was here? Where is she?"

"Yes, sir, I told her through the keyhole; she didn't open the door; she is in her own room with her door locked."

Mr. Sterns shook his head and smiled at his caller.

"This is an extraordinary feminine proceeding that I don't pretend to understand. A man can never understand a woman, Ben, if he lives in the same house with her for a hundred years, and he needn't try. There is some wonderful secret brewing, I suppose, that is to take you by surprise. You were not expected before this evening, you know."

With this Ben Ransom had to be content. He went away, promising to come back in the evening, and to be duly surprised. As he

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

vaulted into his saddle he looked up at the closed blinds of what he knew was Hannah's room and wondered if he knew her secret, and how much of a mess he was in, anyhow.

III.

REVELATIONS.

“**I**T isn’t possible, Hannah, that you mean to continue this folly! I *must* believe that you will return to common sense very soon.”

It was Ben Ransom who spoke; he was in the large old-fashioned parlor of the Sterns farm-house, with its curious mingling of primness and homely luxury such as marked every room that had to do with Hannah. He stood beside the old-fashioned mantelpiece and leaned an elbow on it while he talked. He had taken up and was nervously playing with a queer-shaped piece of coral, that had been brought by a nephew of the house from some far-away port, and was considered a rare bit of ornament. There was an angry light in his eyes, but he was making what was, for Ben Ransom, an unusual effort at self-control.

Hannah Sterns was sitting erect in a straight-backed chair that was placed as far from the mantel as it could conveniently get. She was

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

dry-eyed, and spoke without a suggestion of tremor.

"We need not go over it any more, Benjamin; it cannot be changed by talk, not if we should talk forever; it simply makes it harder for us both."

He made an impatient movement, and the coral dropped from his hand to the stone hearth with a resonant clang. A piece of it broke; he stooped and picked up the pieces, tossing the larger one on the mantel, and keeping the other in his nervous fingers. Despite his nervousness he tried to speak lightly.

"Now, Hannah, be reasonable. I beg you to drop that iceberg tone which positively makes me shiver, and talk and act like yourself. If every poor fellow who is tempted to kiss a pretty child should receive such condign punishment as I am getting, what would become of the world?"

He laughed, as one who had determined to pass the whole matter, whatever it was, as a joke, and made a movement toward her, which she repelled with a motion of her hand.

"Oh, come," he said coaxingly, "don't be cruel any more. I don't want to praise myself; but if you knew the world, you would know that I am a saint as compared with most men. On my honor as a gentleman I had no thought of harm. I should have been quite as likely to kiss the child with you standing beside

me as at any other time." He knew that this was not true, but he did not know that she knew it. "Why should I not? People are always kissing children."

Miss Sterns's face did not change, unless the pallid look that suggested weariness deepened a little. Her voice still had the sound of one who was holding herself to endurance.

"We need not go over that, Benjamin; Lucy is not a child; on the contrary she is a young woman who considers herself of marriageable age. Whatever you may have intended, the girl, I think, is sincere and believes that you — love her." The last two words were pronounced with evident difficulty. "I think she considers that you have acted toward her as men do toward the women they intend to marry; and I cannot help feeling that she is right."

The small piece of coral rattled angrily on the mantel as Ben Ransom flung it down and took two steps forward.

"Upon my word!" he said, "I supposed I had settled that momentous question. Decent men in these days do not often choose two wives at once. Do you forget what I have asked you?"

"I was not the one who forgot, Benjamin; I should never have forgotten. Need we talk any more?"

"Upon my word!" he said again, in increasing anger, "I am tempted to say there is no use in our ever trying to talk together.

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

If you have really no more confidence in me than to suppose that because I have amused myself once or twice with a silly little girl, I am therefore untrue to my pledged word to a woman, why — ” He broke off to say : “ That little Lucy, silly as she is, wouldn’t have given the matter a second thought, I presume, if some one had not put preposterous ideas into her head. It is too absurd, Hannah, the whole of it. Why should you insult yourself as well as me by such unnecessary scenes? I am ready to go down on my knees in apology if necessary, and to promise never to look at the foolish little minx again. I had no idea of annoying you ; upon my honor it had not once occurred to me that a woman of your age and position could be jealous of a red-cheeked housemaid.”

He was not improving the situation. Hannah Sterns rose up, her face a little grayer than before, and her manner more dignified.

“ I cannot talk longer,” she said, “ and there is no need. We have made a grave mistake. I am afraid that we look at things from entirely different standpoints. I did not know that I was a jealous woman, it may be that I am ; at least, I know that what you call amusement I call dishonor. But I will try to be just to you and believe that you meant less than your actions indicated.”

He interrupted her eagerly, catching at what he thought was a sign of relenting.

"Of course, I meant nothing at all; nothing but good-natured friendliness to a rather lonesome little girl. Why, Hannah, there is really not the slightest occasion for all this talk; I am ready to prove in the most conclusive manner possible just what I mean. Will you let me? Let us give the world a surprise and ourselves a holiday and be married at once without any of the usual fuss; to-morrow, or to-day, if you will. Come, I think that would be delicious! What is the sense of keeping me waiting interminable months, getting into all sorts of scrapes on account of loneliness? I am to go to Boston early next week on business for the firm; I'll start this week, and take you with me; make it a wedding trip. The more I think about it the more delighted I am with the idea. It will be great fun to steal a march on all these good people."

Miss Sterns looked at him with increasing wonder. "You have utterly misunderstood me," she said at last. "If the feeling that I have about this revelation of you is properly named 'jealousy,' it is of a kind that cannot be cured by the marriage service. Perhaps you misunderstand all women. Do you think we are so eager to be married that we can condone anything if only that is sure? What I meant to say was that I wanted to think as well of you as I could, and believe you did not intend to do the mischief which you have. I did not

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

suppose it would be necessary to add that I will never marry any man who kisses and caresses other women and calls them endearing names, even though his sole object may be amusement."

In this way closed what had been to Miss Sterns the most marked day of her life. Outwardly she had not made it different from other days. She had come down to her father soon after his guest rode away, and continued the work of looking over the various accounts; saying only, in reply to his curious questioning, that it had not been possible for her to come before.

"Women are queer!" he said, looking at her with thoughtful eyes that had gone back into the past, "and there's a difference in them. Your mother used to rush down the stairs two steps at a time when I came unexpectedly; but she was a good deal younger than you, of course." He heaved a tender little sigh over his happy past and came back to the present.

"Ben was a good deal disappointed, I guess; he went away looking rather gloomy. He didn't know you had come until he got here. Came down on a business trip, and finding that he had time between trains rode out here. He has been very thoughtful of your grandmother and me while you were away; came out three or four times a week to comfort us. I was a good deal surprised at it, too. To tell you the

truth, I had fancied that he was one who wouldn't think twice about us old folks."

The only reply that Hannah made was to say, "Shall we go over the bill for repairs now, father?"

Throughout the remainder of that long day she had kept steadily at work over household matters; going from room to room, keeping the girl, Lucy, constantly with her, and, in the estimation of that young person, making work where there was none.

"I'm that scared of her," Lucy confided to Miranda, "that half the time I don't know what I'm about. I don't see how you've stood her for so many years if she has always been so prim and particular."

"I never had any call to be afraid of her myself," said Miranda, with a toss of her capable head. "She is the mistress of this house, and has a right to be just as particular as she chooses; but folks that are doing their duty have no occasion to be scared about it."

So far as Lucy was concerned there was method in Miss Sterns's day. She had resolved to know the utmost about the girl that could be learned by observation and talk, before the evening brought her lover—if lover he still was—to give what account he could of the scene under the elm.

But it had not been easy for her to question Lucy. Try as she would to broach the sub-

ject of that scene of which she was an unknown witness, her womanhood revolted from it. She could not accuse this ignorant girl of shame-faced impropriety of conduct, without at the same time accusing the man who was her affianced husband. One discovery she made, incidentally, and it was in Lucy's favor so far as it went. Evidently the girl was ignorant of any special ties between Mr. Ransom and her mistress. This was easily accounted for; she was new to the neighborhood, and had made few acquaintances. Miranda, with whom she had been most constantly associated, had been a member of the Sterns household for more than seven years, and was of sturdy Puritan ancestry, with too much native dignity to gossip over what she called "family affairs with a silly girl like Lucy." So at least the girl had meant no disrespect to her mistress. By the middle of the afternoon Miss Sterns had reached the hope that Lucy was simply an untrained forward child who attached no importance to the kisses and caresses she might have been in the habit of receiving from careless men. There was a shade of relief in the thought, yet as she considered it she grew appalled with a sense of responsibility. What was to become of such a girl as that if she came in contact with a man, not simply thoughtless and careless as Ben Ransom was, but one who was a villain by design? Her rigidly trained conscience re-

fused to allow her to put Lucy aside as one with whom she had nothing to do; she must know what the girl thought, and what she needed to be taught.

The day had been chilly, with a suggestion of coming winter in the air, and the busy wind had strewn multitudes of leaves since morning over the well-swept walk. But at four o'clock the great, cheery, neatly kept attic was flooded with sunshine, and was a pleasant place for an hour of work. Thither Miss Hannah summoned Lucy, ostensibly for the purpose of brushing and folding away summer clothing, but in reality to have an uninterrupted talk with the girl. She began abruptly, although she had planned and abandoned a dozen ways of approaching the subject.

"How long have you known Mr. Ransom, Lucy?"

"Ma'am?" said Lucy, and she let fall the summer coat which she had just carefully folded. Miss Hannah repeated her question, adding:—

"I noticed you talking with him this morning."

"Oh," said Lucy, stooping to pick up the coat, her face aflame. "Why—I've known him this good while; ever since I been here."

"Which is about two months, isn't it? Did you meet him first at this house?"

"No'm, I met him on the road. I had been

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

to the store for Mrs. Austin, and I had lots of bundles, and he overtook me and said he was going my way and would carry some of them for me, and he did. He's an awfully kind man, Miss Hannah."

"Is he?" Other words that Miss Hannah might have said were cut off by a vivid remembrance of her own scattered bundles on that same road, and of this "kind" man's efficiency in gathering them for her. It seemed that she and her maid had begun their acquaintance with Ben Ransom in much the same way. She worked steadily at her father's coat for several minutes before she asked:—

"How much have you seen of Mr. Ransom, Lucy? I mean, how well do you know him?"

Lucy giggled. "Why, I don't know," she said. "I feel like I knew him awful well. I had to go to the village pretty near every day for something, and he was comin' out to the store every day 'most, to see to things, and he had to wait for the train back, and it would happen that he hadn't a thing to do when I come along, and he would walk a ways with me, and help carry my things; he said they was too heavy for me. He's been awfully good to me, and I needed somebody, dreadfully; first off I was that lonesome that I didn't know what to do. Miranda ain't no company unless she wants to be, and she didn't want to be for me."

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

Miss Sterns knew intimately the sensible, practical New England woman named Miranda, and could readily understand how little she had in common with this girl.

Lucy, once started, seemed to like to talk, and went on of her own accord : —

“You can’t think what awful lonesome times I had, at first, Miss Hannah. Sometimes when I was going along the road I couldn’t keep the tears back to save my life ; and once, he noticed them and wanted to know what was the matter, and then —” The story stopped abruptly, and Lucy gave a little self-conscious giggle which was peculiar to her and had a peculiarly exasperating effect upon Miss Sterns. Her tones were sharper than she realized.

“I wish you would try not to laugh when you talk, Lucy, especially when there is nothing whatever to laugh at. I am trying to get at the truth about this matter, because I know that you are a motherless girl, alone in the world, and I want to save you from trouble if I can. I may as well say plainly that I saw you this morning when you were under the elm tree with Mr. Ransom. Perhaps you will not be able to understand how shocked I was at the discovery that I had a young girl in my employ who would permit one who was not only nothing to her but was almost a stranger to treat her with such familiarity.”

Then Lucy flushed, and spoke quickly : —

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

“Indeed then, Miss Sterns, you are quite mistaken in me ; I ain’t that kind of a girl. I may be poor, and I haven’t many friends, but I’ve always had a good name and deserved it, and I know how to behave, if I do work out. Mr. Ransom ain’t no stranger to me, I can tell you. Ain’t I just been talking to you about how much I saw of him ? He was out here ’most every day, and he always stopped in the garden or the orchard where I was at work to talk to me. Sometimes he helped me pick the peas and the berries, while he was waiting for your father to finish a letter for him to take to town ; and more than once he climbed a tree to get me the nicest apples. And he come out evenings, too, real often ; lots and lots of times he’s walked home with me from town after dark, and he let me know in more ways than one what he thought of me. I don’t know as I have any call to be ashamed of what you saw this morning, though of course it was awful foolish in him to do it in broad daylight, with folks a-spying around to see him, but there ain’t any particular need for you being shocked about it.”

Miss Sterns had given over any attempt at work. She stood erect, with eyes fixed as if fascinated upon Lucy’s face. When the girl paused for breath, she asked a single question.

IV.

“DAVE.”

“**L**UCY, do you mean me to understand that you think the young man intends to marry you?”

Lucy's color deepened and spread; she laughed nervously, and turned her face quite away from the elder woman's for a moment.

“It kind of takes my breath to hear it right plain,” she said at last. “We ain't got to it — not to talking it straight out. But of course I — well, he knows what he means, and I do, too, for that matter. Ain't that enough?”

“No,” said Miss Sterns, firmly. “It is not enough. I must remind you that no self-respecting girl will receive kisses and caresses from a man who is not very closely related to her, unless he is the one whom she has promised to marry.”

Lucy's eyes blazed dangerously, and all inclination to giggle went from her. She even had a little touch of dignity, which became her, as she said: —

"I am a respectable girl, Miss Sterns, and come of a respectable family. Anybody who knew my folks back there in Green township will tell you so; and I don't let nobody hint at anything different. I'm ready to promise to marry him fast enough, and I'm willing to trust him."

"My girl, will you trust me, and let me be your friend?" Miss Hannah's voice had grown strangely gentle. "Do you mean that you are expecting Mr. Ransom to ask you to marry him?"

Lucy plucked at her apron, and, her momentary flash of anger gone, was visibly embarrassed; but she replied firmly:—

"I do that, ma'am, since you ask me straight out, and I've got reason. I ain't the little fool you take me to be. I s'pose I'm older than you guess; I was nineteen last spring, and it ain't the first time by a good deal that I've had gentleman friends. There was a fellow out to our place that would have give his two eyes to marry me, and he was a nice boy, too, but I wouldn't 'a' had him if he was the last man living, and I let him know it, though he hadn't talked half so plain as Mr. Ransom has. I know how to take care of myself, and the fellows that have tried to make up to me found it out."

"Will you trust me, Lucy, and tell me just what Mr. Ransom has said to you? I have very grave reasons for wanting to know."

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

Lucy's eyes went to the floor, and she gave once more that little embarrassed laugh.

"I dunno as I could. There's been lots of things; I couldn't say them all over to you, you know; it wouldn't be nice in me anyhow. One thing he said a good while ago was that I must never let any other chap kiss me, that he wouldn't stand it — as if I ever would! and one night when I was setting the table for your father and grandmother, he came up unexpected and walked right through the porch window, and said he knew about a little table that should be set for two one of these days, and he knew the names of the two who would set down to it, and then —" A lovely light came into Lucy's eyes and her face took on a sudden resolve.

"I ain't going to tell anybody all the nice things he has said to make me understand. There ain't no reason for doing it, and I'm sorry I said as much as I have; I know he wouldn't like it. I can trust him, Miss Sterns, and I don't want no help from anybody, only him."

It was from such an interview that Miss Sterns had gone, a few hours later, to the parlor to meet her lover.

Ben Ransom, left to himself in the large silent parlor, had abundant opportunity for thought. He had reached what was to him a surprising stage in his career. All his days he had been in the habit of taking life easy and

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

having his own way. Not that he believed the world had treated him well; on the contrary, he considered that his boyhood had been an especially hard one. It had been spent on a rocky unproductive farm in the hill country of what was in those days the far West. His father had been the owner of an equally rocky farm in New England, and after growing utterly discouraged with his prospects, had fallen into the clutches of a Western speculator, and been made to believe that the earth everywhere in that region yielded gold almost for the picking. So he had emigrated when his two boys, David and Benjamin, were aged respectively nineteen and two. The stretch of years between them was spanned by a row of little graves that had been by far the hardest things to leave.

The West had not used them well, at least so far as this world's goods are concerned. The father, who had been feeble in Vermont, did not improve, as it had been hoped that he would, by change of climate, and the growing son, David, had shouldered many burdens and worked beyond his strength. It had been the habit of the household to call Ben "the baby" long after he had outgrown the name, and to shield him from all hardships. It was when Ben was seventeen and his brother David, then just double his age, looked almost like an old man, that the father died, and was followed within the year by the mother.

"Poor Ben!" the neighbors said, and petted and comforted him. But the blow had not fallen so heavily on him as on his elder brother, who had, for so many years, been accustomed to shielding and caring for his father and mother, that he seemed for a while to have lost his chief motive for living.

Ben had never taken kindly to farming; he had declared more than once that he hated every separate stone of their ugly little farm, and that he would rather be a ditch digger at day's wages than to work any kind of a farm. Very little work had he ever done; the three who lived for his sake having agreed that Ben should be kept in school, although, truth to tell, he seemed not much more fond of study than of work.

The sod on his mother's grave had not yet had time to take root when the boy informed his brother that he was going to "dig out" entirely from that part of the world.

As he rode away on horseback from the Sterns farm that evening, after having waited in the lonesome parlor for a full half hour in the hope that Hannah would repent and return to him, his thoughts went away back to that last evening he had spent in the little log cabin of his Western home, and the talk he had had with his brother David.

"Poor Dave!" he said aloud, and a sudden longing came to him to look once more on

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

the rugged face of his tall, stoop-shouldered brother.

"Poor Dave! it is a good while since I have seen him. He must look like an old man by this time." The sentence ended with a sigh. Ben Ransom, although he fully believed that his "little tiff," as he called it, was a temporary affair, felt curiously alone; felt something as he had the evening after his mother was buried. Yet it was less than two weeks afterwards that he had told David good-by. A vision of his brother as he had been on that evening when they had their talk rose up before the young man. It was brilliant moonlight, even as it was at this moment, and Dave had stood at the south window looking out on two graves that showed distinctly in the near distance; looking, and listening to his brother's plans. He could seem to hear his voice as well as see his face when, in his slow grave way, he turned from the window and asked:—

"Where you going, Ben?"

Ben Ransom remembered that he had laughed a little as he replied that he hadn't got so far as that, except to be sure that it was somewhere in the East; he hated the West, he knew that much. He should have gone off before this if it hadn't been for mother.

There had been a quality in David's voice in reply that had irritated him; yet all he had said was:—

"It is well you didn't do that, Ben ; mother had it hard enough without anything more."

He remembered that his face had grown red, and he had felt angry, and had told himself that if Dave thought, because he was a few years the older, he was going to stand any preaching from him, he would find himself mistaken.

But David had not preached, although they both knew he could have said that the heaviest burdens his father and mother had had to bear during their later years were those created by their younger son. For Ben had been what the neighborhood in which he was reared called "wild." The man on horseback laughed over the memory of the "wildness" of his early youth. What had he done but stay out late at night, occasionally, — sometimes even all night, — and join with the fellows once in a while in their frolics? It had all been very innocent compared with some of the wildnesses of his later years. He laughed again, a laugh that had almost a sneer in it, as he thought of how some of his later "scrapes" would have shocked Dave ; almost as much as they would Hannah Sterns ; Dave always was a womanish kind of man. But he made haste to tell himself that after all he had never done anything very dreadful. On the whole, he had contrived to be a pretty decent sort of fellow, and was now in a fair way to become a respectable country gentleman with a good-sized bank account and many

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

fertile acres of his own to manage, provided he could succeed in restoring Hannah Sterns to her senses. The Sterns farm was very unlike his father's poor little Western hillside. He frowned a little when he thought of the trouble he was in.

"Who would have supposed that that little fool of a Lucy could—" Here in his thoughts he broke off abruptly and returned to a more distant past. For some reason his brother David persisted in being thought about, though he had not been heard from in three years. But that was not David's fault; the younger brother remembered that he had received several letters since he wrote one, though Dave was not much at letter-writing; but he was a good brother. He did not preach on the evening of that last talk; instead, he said, in his slow, thoughtful way:—

"There is something I wanted to talk with you about, Ben; I hadn't meant to do it yet, but if you are thinking of plans, maybe I better. Margaret and I are talking about getting married before a great while. We've been thinking of that a long time, you know, and it doesn't seem best to wait much longer; mother didn't want us to,—she talked to us both about it that last afternoon."

The young man on horseback remembered that he had laughed a little as he replied:—

"I should think you and Margaret had

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

waited about long enough ; the wonder is that you haven't got tired of each other long ago ; I am sure I should."

It had seemed to him that ever since he could remember, his brother David had been engaged to Margaret Barrows, who lived with her lame old father in a little cabin two miles away, and kept the toll-gate.

"No," David had said gravely, "we ain't tired of each other ; and what I wanted to say was, that you are welcome here at home just as long as you choose to stay, — always, if you say so. It needn't make a mite of difference to you that I built the little house ; you are just as welcome to your own room as you ever were ; Margaret feels so too. And if you care to farm it with me, why, we'll go equal shares, and not let the plans we made before make a mite of difference ; there isn't very much difference anyway, and I being a good deal older than you, it is no more than natural and right that I should help give you a start. I believe that you and I can make a good living out of this farm, and have a little something left at the end of the year. We'll have quite a little nest-egg to start with, you know."

Ben had known all about it. He was a lad of thirteen when the old log cabin burned, and he perfectly understood that the new one was built chiefly by his brother David, and paid for with David's earnings, with the understanding

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

that it should be used by the father and mother so long as they needed it, and then should become David's own, the land to be divided equally between the two sons. He also understood perfectly about the "nest-egg," the snug little sum of seven hundred dollars that had accumulated in the bank during these later years. "Every penny of it is David's," he had heard his father say more than once. "If it hadn't been for his new ideas that worked, there wouldn't have been a cent over. We must plan so that David can keep it for his start in life." And Ben knew that it had been so planned; yet here was David saying "we" instead of "I," and preparing to go halves even with the little four-roomed house.

He was glad to remember that, although he had laughed at his brother's plans for making a farmer of him, he had not sneered; and he believed he had made Dave understand that he considered him a thoroughly good, unselfish fellow; but he had also made it plain that to stay on at the farm was no part of his intention.

"I wasn't cut out for a farmer, Dave," he had said. "I should help you make a failure of it a good deal quicker than you will do it without me. I don't know anything about it, you see; while you have been digging and ploughing I have been in school. I want to get away; I belong to New England atmosphere; I've always felt that, ever since I was

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

old enough to understand mother's talk about the old home ; I shall not be happy until I get there.

"I'll tell you what, Dave, I see you want to be the good, honest, unselfish fellow that you always have been, and I'll show you how to do it and help yourself at the same time. If you will give me that nest-egg for my share, you may have every foot of land on this old farm for your own ; I'll sign off all right and title to it forever and ever. Of course my half of the farm is worth more than seven hundred dollars, but I don't care ; I can be generous once in a while as well as you ; it wouldn't be worth it to me, because I don't know how to manage it and don't want to ; we should just go to ruin together ; but with seven hundred dollars in my pocket, I'll risk but what I can make my way in the world, and give you and Margaret a lift now and then in the bargain."

He had believed every word he said, and had felt magnanimous while he was saying them. It is true he knew very well that during the years in which his father had owned the stony little hillside he could hardly have given it away had he tried ; but he also knew that his father had believed that sometime the little town nearest to the farm would grow into a large one, and land would become valuable. The boy of seventeen, thinking it over, had told himself that he was throwing away what

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

might be a good many hundreds in the future ; but he had whistled and said that he did not care ; “ A bird in the hand was worth two in the bush,” and had made his offer. He remembered that he felt a little hurt over his brother's long silence. He had not realized then, what he knew afterwards, that the giving up of the nest-egg would necessitate another year's delay of the marriage, and that to live through the long, cold winter without any money at all would be hard. He had realized nothing save that he was deliberately giving up all right and title to a number of acres of ground, and his brother seemed actually to be hesitating over it !

The gazer out of that moon-lighted window had turned his eyes at last from the graves and fixed them full on his young brother as he said : —

“ Well, Ben, if you are sure that is what you want, why — I'll agree to it.” And then he had drawn a heavy sigh. But that had probably been on account of those two graves.

V.

THE MAN WHO WAS BORED.

THE afternoon mail had lost time at the junction and was making high speed toward the city, but it was not going fast enough to satisfy Mr. Ransom. He looked at his watch for the third time in ten minutes, and remarked that they were not going to get in for dinner.

His wife pursed up her mouth into an expression of contempt, as she said : —

“It won’t make any difference; this is corned-beef-and-cabbage day, and you hate them both, so you won’t mind if they are cold.” Over this reminder he looked gloomy, and replied : —

“Still, a fellow has got to eat something, and if he can’t afford decent board he must take what he can get.”

This made the young wife sigh as she said : —

“Oh, Ben! if we could only manage that little round table just big enough for two that you used to talk about.”

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

She wanted him to say cheerfully : —

"Never mind, darling, some day we will manage it, and in the meantime we have each other." But he did not ; instead, he distinctly frowned, then yawned, and said nothing.

Within three minutes he looked at his watch again, though without noting the time, and sprang up like one who had reached a decision.

"I'm going into the next car for a few minutes."

His wife looked her disappointment.

"Oh, Ben ! Why must you ? You surely can't want to smoke again so soon ; it isn't more than half an hour since you came back."

"It is nearer two hours," he said. "Besides, there are some men in there it might be well for me to have a talk with about business. I shall not be gone long."

As he strode toward the smoker his wife watched him with eyes that might almost have been called hungry ; there was pride in them, also. To the observing they said : —

"He is the handsomest man on this train, and every inch a gentleman, and he is *my* husband."

"You are proud of him, ain't you ?" said a middle-aged woman, with a good-natured face and an unmistakable air of country breeding. She had been sitting just back of the young couple for several hours, and was evidently interested in them.

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

The wife laughed and blushed.

"I ain't enough used to him not to keep watching him whenever he stirs," she explained. "It ain't quite four months since we was married."

"I thought so," said the motherly woman, with a sagacious nod of her head. "I've been married twenty odd years, but I've got a girl who was married last month, and I know the signs. They get over it after a spell."

She laughed comfortably, as though the getting over it had not been very trying in her experience. But the young wife bridled.

"I ain't ever going to get over it," she said, "if you mean thinking about him and liking to be with him and all that; I think it's nice to keep on that way forever."

"So 'tis," the older woman said heartily. "I've kept on, I can tell you. I like a visit with my man now a good deal better than I do with other folks, and so does he. Only last week he says to me, 'Mother,' says he, 'let's you and me go and take a ride all by ourselves like we used to.' And we did it, too; left every chick of them at home."

She laughed softly over the memory, and did not notice the wistful look that came into the young wife's eyes. She, poor girl, could not help wondering, doubtfully, if, twenty years from now, Ben would care like that.

"All I was meaning was," said the matron,

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

"that they get over showing it out so plain; get used to it, you know; just as you said. Oh, the real thing don't ever wear out; but there is a good deal of it nowadays that — well, that won't bear washing. I hope to the land that my girl has got the real kind, and I guess she has. We was real careful about who she married. 'It don't make no difference what his prospects are,' her father said; 'what I want to know is what kind of a character has he got?' I tell you it stands parents in hand to be dreadful particular, these days."

They talked together cheerfully, after that, the motherly matron and the wife who was only a girl. While she talked, or listened, she kept a keen lookout for the opening door, and told herself at intervals that the men in that old smoker must have some dreadfully important business to talk over with Ben since it took so long.

Could she have had a glimpse of her husband in the smoker, she would have been more troubled by his long absence than she was.

He had closed the car door with a slam, and, going to the extreme forward end of the smoker, had seated himself with his back to all the other occupants. Then he had lighted a cigar, placed it in his mouth, and drawn his hat down over his eyes; not so much for the purpose of thinking, as in order to brood.

The simple truth was that Ben Ransom, who had been a married man for not quite four months,

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

was bored almost beyond endurance, and did not as yet know how to escape from himself. Could Miss Sterns have seen him that afternoon, would she have thought that she had managed well or ill? For it was Miss Sterns who had resolutely willed that Ben Ransom should marry poor little Lucy, and had held all the interested parties firmly to this course of action. Not that Mr. Ransom had especially chafed under it. When he had finally been able to take in the fact that Hannah Sterns did not intend to marry him, his most profound sensation had been one of surprise. He had chafed under the discipline of her indignation because he believed that it augured ill for his future peace. A jealous wife, he told himself, was something that he had always intended to shun, and if Hannah was so intolerably jealous now, what would she be when they were married? Not for a moment had he hesitated over that last phrase. Of course they would be married. Why, the girl was nearing her thirty-second year! he would risk her being so foolish as to deliberately, for the sake of a jealous whim, throw away what was probably a last opportunity.

But Miss Sterns had been just so foolish, and had looked at him in cold surprise because he ventured to hint at any other course.

"Has not the girl told the truth, Benjamin? Did not you call her your darling, and bid her

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

never to allow any other man to kiss her? And say that a little round table with her sitting opposite would be home enough for you to all eternity? I am humiliated at having to refer to such sacred confidences, but you compel me to make them common. I am not blaming you, except when you seem to infer that there could be other honorable end to such talk than marriage. This is the natural condition of things; it was I who made the mistake of believing that there could be an exception to the ordinary."

There seemed to be no satisfactory reply to make to this, and Ben Ransom, after a period of indignation, did as he had done all his life,—yielded to what could not be avoided without making "too much fuss to pay," and allowed himself to be married to pretty Lucy. Why not? she was a nice little thing, and dead in love with him, it seemed. As for her education, it was doubtless about as good as his. She made more slips in grammar, it is true, but that was probably owing to her having had less opportunity than he to talk with educated people. She was a cute little girl, as pretty as a picture, and he would risk but that she would take on style fast enough if she was given half a chance.

That thought made him sigh and look gloomy. "Style," as he used the word, called for money; and it was impossible for him to

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

forget that in the new order of things he lost the broad spreading highly cultivated acres and the substantial bank account on which he had been calculating. Given these on Lucy's side, and he knew that he would not have hesitated a moment between the two women.

And yet—he was not wholly mercenary, nor had he consciously chosen a wife because of her money. He laughed a little as he told himself that he had not deliberately *chosen* a wife at all; it had simply happened. It was a case of loneliness and propinquity. It had been very pleasant to be admitted to friendly relations with what was decidedly the leading family in the smart little town. On his first arrival in it he heard Mr. Sterns, and especially Miss Sterns, quoted, admired, deferred to, and depended upon for all functions calling for money and good breeding. Even the firm of Wilcox and Harter, by whom he was employed, apparently conducted their rather pretentious branch store with special view to the convenience of this important family.

To put himself on an at-home footing with these people, and be able to enjoy their books and flowers and fruits and horses, had seemed to Ben Ransom eminently sensible; and, a happy accident opening the way, he had set about it with energy and success. The rest had "happened." He had honestly admired Miss Sterns from the first. The fact was he

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

had had intimate acquaintance with very few young women who were able not only to talk well and dress well, but who were their own mistresses, so far as time and money were concerned, and had prospective fortunes close at hand. Miss Sterns united these and other excellent qualifications in herself, and to Ben Ransom their growing friendship seemed not only natural, but sensible. There were times when he thought her a trifle too self-sustained, and almost too devoted to her father and grandmother. Still, a good daughter generally made a good wife, and both these relatives were rapidly growing old. As for the difference in age between Hannah and himself, — if she did not care he did not see why he should. He could conceive of circumstances in which such a state of things would be comfortable. An older wife would not be so likely to insist upon the constant attentions of a fellow, and would be more reasonable about a number of things.

On the whole, Mr. Ransom was well satisfied with what had happened, and remained so even after Lucy came to the farm-house to live, and he found her to be “as pretty as a witch, and as cute as a kitten.” He had planned for her a permanent situation as a sort of parlor maid, whose chief duty would be to wait upon Hannah and himself, — especially himself. He had decided that he would have her always dressed in becoming colors — the witch knew

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

how to do it, — and be around when there was company. He also planned various little kindnesses that he would show her personally, including a trip now and then, when he would please her and amuse himself; but in his gloomy moods he assured himself that, despite Hannah Sterns's strait-laced theories and Lucy's unparalleled ignorance, he had never dreamed even for a moment of making her his wife. Yet it was nearly four months since that had been done; sometimes he laughed, and occasionally he sneered, when he thought how surely Miss Sterns had done it. The marriage had taken place in the Sterns parlor, and Miss Sterns had given the fine white robes in which the bride was arrayed, and Miranda had dressed her for the ceremony, and there had been a brave little wedding; quite private, as became such newcomers to the neighborhood, but very pretty, with a really elegant wedding breakfast.

The few neighbors, who were on passably intimate terms with the Sterns family, said that everything was just as it should be, that Miss Hannah never did anything halfway; and they wondered that they had not thought of some such simple explanation to that young man's constant running there. The probability was that the Sterns family had known the young man's folks, lived neighbor to them sometime, maybe, and that as soon as Miss Hannah heard of Mr. Ransom's engagement to that little

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

Lucy, she had had her come there to stay awhile, being she had no mother, so that the young folks could see each other often. It was just like Miss Hannah to be looking out for other people. Miranda, the Puritan maid, who knew better, closed her lips when she heard these and other explanations, and said not a word. The explanations all sounded well, and whose business was it, anyhow, except Miss Hannah's?

Immediately following the wedding breakfast, Mr. Ransom had taken his bride to his boarding-house in town, and thereafter she was seen no more. This feature of the affair scandalized the neighbors somewhat. They thought it very strange that the bride did not show gratitude enough to come out and call upon the people who had done so much for her. They said they should think Mr. Ransom would really insist upon it, so kind as they had always been to him, too! But that was just like newly married people; they believed that the world was made on purpose for them, and they couldn't think of anybody but themselves.

As a matter of fact, the two young people had many thoughts that they would not have cared to share with each other. It would be sorrowfully near the truth to say that both were disappointed. Heretofore, the young man had chiefly played at living. Absurd as

it may seem, he had not even thought seriously of the fact that it would cost more for two to live than for one. That might have been accounted for in part by the remembrance that, up to a few weeks before his marriage, his feeling had been that that ceremony was to lift him forever above the necessity for small economies, and he did not readily adjust himself to the changed situation. The constant petty economies that he was compelled to practice almost immediately after his marriage fretted him as nothing in his heretofore careless and selfish life had done. He could not help grumbling before his wife over trifles that suggested his poverty.

"Poor old watch!" he had said one morning, while he was winding an old-fashioned timepiece. "Little I thought when I took possession of it that after all these years I should still be carrying the same old thing! I had an idea that I should send it back to Dave in much less time than this,—and now I don't see any prospect of ever having a better one."

"Did Dave give it to you?" asked Lucy, who, having been early orphaned and being without brothers or sisters, was hungry for anything that sounded like family, and often asked almost wistful questions about "Dave."

"No, he didn't," her husband answered shortly; "it wasn't his to give."

His wife could see that for some reason the

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

question had irritated him ; she had often occasion to wonder why this was the case.

Had he chosen to do so, he could have explained that the talk had carried him back to the little four-roomed house and his last evening at home. He had asked Dave for the seven-hundred-dollar nest-egg, but he had claimed his father's old watch as his right. And Dave, who had quietly yielded the money, had held out sturdily for the watch, reminding his brother that father always meant it should be his. He had been answered sharply that the idea was ridiculous.

"What use could you make of a watch? You never go three miles from home, and the kitchen clock keeps good time. It is different with me ; knocking about the world as I shall be, I simply must have a watch, and father would have given it to me in a minute. It is a horrid old-fashioned thing, to be sure, but it will have to do until I earn a better one. I'll send it back to you before long, you may be sure of that ; but I can't manage without it now."

Dave had yielded at last, but he had seemed to care more about the old watch than he did for the seven hundred dollars.

It had been one of Ben Ransom's pet day-dreams, during that brief period in which he had thought of himself as a man of wealth, that he would wrap the old watch in a thousand-

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

dollar check some day, and send both by express to Dave.

He had thought of that vanished dream as he looked at his watch that day on the train, and had told himself angrily that Lucy and Hannah Sterns, between them, had managed to make that, and most other things he had meant to do, impossible.

VI.

OPPORTUNITY.

MRS. HENRY COLLINS was in her smart little parlor in earnest conversation with her sister, Mrs. Mitchell, and her sister-in-law, Mrs. George Collins. The ladies all wore anxious faces, and the atmosphere, in that subtle way which we feel but cannot describe, hinted that the topic under discussion was not only perplexing but in some respects embarrassing.

They were not getting on. The others felt that, when Mrs. Henry Collins repeated what she had already said three times. "I'm sure I don't know what can be done." Evidently the others felt that if Mrs. Henry really did not know, certainly they did not, and an ominous silence followed.

Mrs. Henry Collins spoke again, almost irritably.

"It isn't possible that any person can expect me, with my large family of little ones and limited means, to add another burden. Henry feels that I have already assumed more than I ought."

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

Then Mrs. George Collins said a word that had not been spoken before, looking steadily at Mrs. Henry's sister as she did so.

"If any one of us could do anything, it would have to be Sarah, I should think. She is the one who has plenty of room, and, for that matter, plenty of other things."

Mrs. Mitchell, thus pointedly referred to, laughed nervously, but her words were quick and somewhat high keyed.

"How easy it is to see other people's duties for them! And yet it seems to me that people must be getting insane who suppose that I with my poor health could do anything toward looking after a little child! Of course I am willing to help in any way that I can, but to shoulder responsibility is not to be thought of for a moment."

Then Mrs. Henry Collins arose to the situation.

"I don't see that any of us are called upon to sacrifice our own families. Sarah, as she says, is almost an invalid now; and you, Maria, have a boy of about the same age to think of, and of course I am out of the question, as you all know. There is no sense in our beating about the bush in this way; what has to be said may as well be said at once. I don't see any way but to send the child to the Orphans' Home. It isn't as though he was near of kin. Joel Kingsbury was only a cousin of father

Collins, and his son, Harlan, is of course farther removed still."

"He is nothing at all to me," said Mrs. Mitchell, but the remark was unfortunate. Her sister, who had just advocated her side, turned upon her with some asperity.

"I wouldn't say that if I were you, Sarah, when your husband's father was brought up by old Deacon Kingsbury and treated as though he was his own child. What are cousins compared with such ties? If you weren't in poor health, I am sure I would think your duty was plain enough."

Mrs. Mitchell was annoyed and spoke with plainness.

"You are very kind to exonerate me on the score of ill health from a supposed duty, but I don't see it in that light. My husband's father did his duty by the Kingsburys, and was a better son to the old deacon than Harlan Kingsbury was to his father. I consider Harlan Kingsbury a failure myself. What has he ever done for the world but marry a girl without constitution or anything else before he was able to support a wife? They both died early, of course, as might have been expected, and left a sickly boy, I presume, for others to bring up. You know, Helen, that Mrs. Collins told Harlan five years ago that he never ought to have married, having neither health nor money."

"Well," said Mrs. Henry Collins, "he did marry, and he died, and the consequences of both have got to be shouldered by somebody. Of course he was foolish not to have married a girl who could support him, since there was no prospect of his being able to support himself; but all that can't be helped now."

Mrs. George Collins arose. "Well," she said, "I must get home. I left a dozen things that needed my attention, to come here about this matter; and, after all, we haven't accomplished anything; unless it is that we have discovered what we each won't do."

"What we can't do, you mean," said her sister-in-law, with a sigh. "I am sure I wish I were so situated that I could offer the poor child a home."

Then Mrs. Mitchell made the remark of the hour.

"Have any of you thought how it would do to appeal to Miss Hannah?"

"Miss Hannah!" the two other ladies repeated the name in astonished chorus.

"That was what I said. Don't you remember that Harlan Kingsbury spent a winter at the Sterns farm that time when he was teaching in the South district, and how fond they were of him?—especially Miss Hannah. People even said at one time that perhaps she was going to marry him."

"I wish she had!" said Mrs. Mitchell, with energy. "There wouldn't have to be any talk

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

of 'Orphans' Home' in that case. I wonder what Miss Hannah means to do with all her money? Not a creature of her own kin to leave it to."

"I am sure there are people enough for her to be interested in," said Mrs. Henry, who could not help thinking of her own five children, one of whom, on the strength of a very distant relationship between her husband and the Sterns family, she had named Hannah, while her second son was Hugh Sterns Collins, in honor of Miss Hannah's father; "I certainly do not think for a moment of appealing to her for help, and I hope none of us will be so bereft of family pride as to do it. Because we are not able to care for the child ourselves is no reason why we should publish it to the world by begging for him. There are public institutions intended for just such cases, and if we have to help support them, why shouldn't we make use of them?"

"Here is the very woman we are talking about, hitching her horse to your post!" said Mrs. George Collins, turning hastily back from the door and reseating herself. The opportunity for an interview with Miss Hannah was not to be lost for trifles. The other ladies were duly interested, though Mrs. Henry maintained her dignity, refusing even to look out of the window as she explained that Miss Hannah was probably making use of their

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

hitching-post for her horse while she visited the sick neighbor around the corner. She was sure she did not know what the neighborhood would do without their hitching-post; even the doctor tied his horse there.

But Miss Hannah, instead of crossing to the other corner, opened Mrs. Henry's gate and came briskly up her walk.

The years had changed her. While at thirty-one, — or, as Ben Ransom had put it, nearing thirty-two, — she so little looked her age as to be constantly guessed, by strangers, to be "about twenty-five," barely eight years afterwards she looked so fully forty that no one ever guessed her age as less, and there were those who felt willing to wager that she "would never see forty-five again."

Perhaps it was largely a matter of dress. Miss Hannah, who had never been what the country people called "dressy," had grown noticeably plainer in her attire from year to year, until now she had all but adopted a uniform. At least she was always seen in a black alpaca dress not too fine for steady wear; the skirt made straight and plain, and reaching only to the tops of her strong farm shoes. Waist and sleeves never changed their shape, no matter what were fashion's dictates. Both were perfectly plain, the sleeves at times larger, and then, with another season, smaller than the prevailing mode; but it was the mode that changed, not

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

Hannah. The waist, too, was plain, close fitting, always a little lower in the neck than custom dictated, and its wearer had discarded every form of collar as superfluous.

As for bonnets, she had discarded them also, and wore that always offensive addition to a middle-aged woman's toilet,—a large round hat. She had bought it seven years before with a view to shading her eyes from the sun's glare, and had never changed either its shape or trimming.

"Why should I have a new one?" she had asked her grandmother, the only person who ventured to question her ways,—it was after the hat had seen three years' service. "It isn't worn out, and if it fitted my head three years ago, it stands to reason that it does now; my head hasn't changed its shape,—why should my hat have to?"

Now the hat was nearing the close of its sixth year, and in Miss Hannah's opinion was not yet worn out. But the grandmother had gone away. There was no one left to question the doings of Hannah Sterns, and her word was law,—not only among the men who worked the broad acres that were now hers, but among most of the people with whom she came in contact. If Hannah Sterns at thirty had been an acknowledged influence in the neighborhood where she lived, at forty she might almost have been said to own the neighborhood, so regal was her power. She had not the name of having

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

sweetened in her nature as she grew older. Indeed it was a standing joke among the more uncultivated of the farmers that "old-maid Hannah" did well not to change her name, if she would drop the last *s*, it would fit her to a dot.

"How dreadfully gray she is! Seems to me that every time I see her she looks five years older." Mrs. George Collins had just time to make this remark before Miss Hannah was ushered in, looking as crisp as the November air which ruled outside.

"So you are all together," she said briskly, contenting herself with a cheerful bow for each, and, ignoring the easy-chair, which was hastily moved forward, she took the only straight-backed one in the room.

"That saves my time. I didn't know but I should have to run around to each of your houses to find out what I want to know. I suppose you can tell me about Harlan Kingsbury's affairs?—where the child is, and how he is left. You are the only living relatives, I believe?" The sisters exchanged quick glances. They had not been sure that their connection with that unfortunate name was known or remembered.

"Why, yes," said Mrs. Henry Collins. "There is a family connection; we had almost forgotten it, however, the tie is so distant. We were just talking over poor Harlan's affairs;

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

it is all very sad. There is a child, as you say, a little fellow not yet three, I believe; and left utterly penniless."

"And the mother? What about her? Had she relatives to claim the child?"

"Oh, the *mother*! no, indeed. You knew, did you not, that the marriage was a sort of *mésalliance*?"

"No," said Miss Hannah, with firmness, "I didn't. On the contrary I supposed they were a very happy couple. I heard that Harlan married a respectable, well-brought-up girl, who was devoted to him."

"Oh, she was respectable, certainly," Mrs. Collins made haste to say, "and well enough brought up, so far as I know. But still, the family was not like ours, you know — not what we had been used to. The girl was an orphan when Harlan married her, and was not only without a penny of her own, but hadn't even much clothing, and no preparation whatever for housekeeping. Besides she was a frail, sickly girl, or delicate, at least. The last person on earth that a poor man like Harlan Kingsbury ought to have thought of marrying."

"You think he ought to have known enough to choose a wife who could have supported him, eh?" Miss Sterns said. "Perhaps the accident of his having fallen in love with her had something to do with it. I am not supposed

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

to know much about these matters, but I believe, among respectable people, there is a sort of prejudice in favor of letting that consideration weigh something. However, he married her, and since we can't change the situation, let us hope that he never wanted to. Our responsibility comes in now. What is to be done with the boy? Which of you is going to take him?"

This was dreadful. There was an awkward pause, — then three eager tongues, as each made haste to explain the impossibility of her assuming such a trust. Mrs. Mitchell, with effort, succeeded in getting before Miss Hannah the fact that she was not a relative even by marriage, and Mrs. George Collins immediately said that sometimes the ties of friendship were greater than those of blood, especially where there was such tremendous obligation for past kindnesses as the Mitchells must feel.

"Then you mean," said Miss Hannah, interrupting what she perceived was beginning to be a family altercation, "that you are not going to interfere, any of you, either now or later, with the disposal of the child; that, so far as you are concerned, he may go to an Orphans' Asylum and stay as long as they are a mind to keep him. Is that about it?"

"Why, of course," said Mrs. Henry Collins; "if the time should ever come when we could do anything for him, we should be — but with

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

my large family and unusually heavy responsibilities, — Mr. Collins's mother lives with me, you know, — I don't — ”

“ You don't think it at all probable that such a time will ever come? I don't believe it will. And you think the same? ” She had turned to Mrs. George Collins.

“ I am quite sure of it,” said that lady, with decision. “ I was never a devoted admirer of Harlan Kingsbury, and I did not approve of his marriage in the least, no matter how deeply in love he may have been. My own opinion is that in this as in all other things people should exercise common sense. For a man in his circumstances to make the kind of marriage he did was to fly in the face of Providence. What has happened is just what was to have been expected, and I don't feel the slightest sense of responsibility with regard to his child. If I hadn't a boy of my own to think about, I might do something for this one, but it would be in the interests of humanity, and not because I felt under any obligation to do so.”

“ Very well,” said Miss Hannah, rising. “ Then my way is clear, and I shall act in the interests, not only of humanity, but of friendship. I didn't want to interfere with other people's rights ; but since you don't any of you feel that you have any, there will be no danger. I shall take the boy at once, and

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

bring him up on the farm. His father was very fond of farm life. I am going to town this afternoon, and I may as well make the arrangements without delay and send for him. I understand that the neighbors who are looking after him now are waiting for some of us to act. I have been thinking for some time of taking a child, and I consider myself fortunate in having Harlan Kingsbury's son. I always liked Harlan. I thought of it as soon as I heard of his wife's death, but I was afraid the relatives would think I had no right to the child. I'm much obliged to you for clearing the road so completely. I feel now that I have a right to act as though he hadn't a friend in the world but me."

She gave the three astonished women no chance to express their views. Indeed, they had to follow her to the hall to hear the closing words; and, before they had recovered from their spell, she had climbed into her spring wagon and driven rapidly away.

VII.

A LOOK BACKWARD.

TO say that the neighborhood and surrounding country were astonished when they heard of Miss Hannah Sterns's determination to adopt a child, is to put it mildly. The whole country simply seethed with it, and the substantial old town residents who had always known the Sterns family were also interested. Opinions differed, of course, with regard to it. There were those who laughed, and those who sneered. "An old maid undertaking to bring up a child! Were there not avenues enough for her eccentricities without going out of her way to that extent?" There were those who pitied the child, and who did not hesitate to say plainly that a decently managed Orphan Asylum would be more comfortable for him than would the hourly espionage of a cranky old maid like Miss Hannah.

"Poor baby!" said the gay girls, and shrugged their shoulders. "Little he knows what he is coming to! he will have to eat and sleep and even cry by rule!"

"Cry!" one exclaimed. "Do you imagine for a moment that Miss Hannah will allow crying? I hope the poor mother doesn't know, up in heaven, what is to become of her baby."

There were others who said that the baby was to be congratulated, of course, but they pitied poor Miss Hannah, who did not know what she had undertaken. Even a reasonably good and quiet child could drive a woman like her, all unused to children, to utter distraction; and if the child had inherited the Kingsbury temper, she would have a sweet time with him! Then, some one made haste to say that the Sterns temper could match the Kingsbury, any day, when it was once roused, and that perhaps it would be a case of "Greek joining Greek." Between them all, the prospects of a quiet life for either Miss Hannah or the baby were not flattering. But Miss Hannah went quietly on her way. She was not ignorant of the talk that floated about her, but she was, as usual, indifferent to it. She kept her own counsel completely; only the trusted Miranda—who had long before said "no" to as earnest a wooing as was ever made, apparently for the sole purpose of remaining with Miss Hannah—being aware of the day and hour when the baby might be expected to arrive at the farm. It was but the evening before his expected coming that Miss Hannah,

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

believing everything to have been done that should be done in her outside world, locked the door of her large, clean, dreary room upon herself for a special purpose. Those three adjectives, by the way, might have been applied to every room in the Sterns house — “large, clean, and dreary.”

Miss Hannah was dimly aware that the sense of homely cheer which used to pervade the atmosphere had slipped away. She had never for a moment owned to herself that a subtle sense of loss in this direction might have been one of the motives which prompted her to her new departure.

Four years before this date her father had gone suddenly out from her life, affording the daughter, who had given herself for him, almost no opportunity for the dutiful and tender ministrations to which she had looked forward. She did not understand until afterwards that her heart had really hungered for the time when her father should cease to be chiefly interested in crops and tenants and investments, and would be dependent upon her, not only for his daily comforts but for his interests. They had not been demonstrative as a family. Hannah had rarely kissed her father, and even her mother, who had been always gentler and less vigorous than the father, had been sparing of caresses. Growing up in this atmosphere, Hannah had not known that she had missed

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

anything, until one evening, long ago, when Ben Ransom boldly kissed her. She had felt the color flame out on her cheeks and creep up over her forehead, and he had laughed, and asked her what was the matter, and had kissed her again. And no human being had known, or, she believed, ever would know, what those kisses and caresses became to her. She had lived upon them; fed her memory with them during that three months' absence from home, and hungered for them on her home-coming in a way that bewildered herself. This, until that November morning, now long past, in which she had stood and watched those kisses being given under the elm tree. It was then that her own had turned to ashes.

She had folded over that page in her life after that day. She had resolutely given herself anew and without any reservation to her father and grandmother from that hour. She had told herself that they should be her world. And then — her father had said to her one evening as the clock struck nine, "Good night, Hannah," in his usual kind friendly tone, and before nine of the following evening had whispered with utmost difficulty, "Good-by, Hannah," and gone away forever. Barely six months from that day, the grandmother, on whom was to have been lavished all the thought and care intended for two, had sickened, and, after a sharp illness of less than a week's duration,

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

when she did not know who ministered to her, or care indeed if there was ministry, she, too, went away, and Miss Hannah was alone in the world.

She stayed alone, she and Miranda, contrary to the advice of all her friends; and they said that she had grown both queer and hard under the ordeal.

On that last evening she had simply smiled on Miranda's earnest petition that she would go to bed early because she looked "all tuckered out and ought to be good and fresh for to-morrow," and had told her she would not be long; and then had locked her door and brought out on her table a little wooden box painted black and locked with a padlock. It contained a few of the keepsakes of her meagre, barren life. Just why she felt that to-night she must go over them and put them away she could not have told. She had a feeling that she was ushering herself into a new world with the morrow's changes, and that all the old life must be put away. But that, of course, was absurd, when it was only a baby of less than three years who was coming.

It was a small box, and the first thing she took from it was a package of letters from the young man who had gone to China, and thence to heaven. She had meant to keep him in mind, and do for him and his. But the young wife had died, also, and there were no children.

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

Why had she kept his few eager letters written before he had quite given up the hope of taking her to China with him? She told herself that she simply had not taken time to go over her boxes, and not that it was because that particular box held skeletons of her girlhood from which the middle-aged woman shrank.

She dropped the package of foreign letters into her waste-basket without even untying it. Then came a few letters from that friend who had gone West to seek his fortune, and of whom she had lost all trace. She smiled as the handwriting recalled the youthful face. She wondered how he looked at forty-five. Younger than she, probably, much younger; women aged early, — and then she sighed. What a pity she had not kept track of him; if he married a good woman, she might have had a friend. What was this? Why! Was it possible she had laid that photograph away? It must have been slipped in among some letters unnoticed. Certainly she had not meant to hoard Ray Prescott's picture! It was a good face, though it scarcely did him justice. Ray Prescott had a face that was worthy of remembrance. The middle-aged woman held his shadow thoughtfully and realized, as she had not at the time, that she had been hard on him. It was during the winter following Ben Ransom's marriage with the girl, Lucy, that she had met him, a young minister who was supplying a vacant

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

pulpit in a neighboring town, and who had brought a letter of introduction to her father from an old college friend. Her father, who was not well that winter, and who missed much of his outdoor life, had hailed the coming of a new face with keen pleasure, and had speedily grown fond of Mr. Prescott. For her father's sake Hannah had been hospitable and always glad to see him; but no thought of herself had entered into the acquaintance which grew rapidly into friendship. When at last he made his earnest plea that the young woman who had been so heartily interested in all his plans for work would join her life to his and work with him, she was not only astonished but fairly irritated. Her negative reply was emphatic and sharp. Why need he spoil her father's comfort in his society by such utter folly? She had never for a moment dreamed of such a result. Had it come to pass that a young woman could not have a masculine acquaintance without his thinking that she wanted to marry him? Moreover, what had become of his good sense? Did he not know that she was older than he? No man in his senses should choose a woman who was his senior; it was contrary to nature, and always, she believed, ended in misery. The young man, who knew nothing about Ben Ransom and the sore and wounded heart which Hannah Sterns carried about with her because of him, was both

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

pained and puzzled over the sharpness of her manner. He tried to tell her that there could be at the most but a few months' difference in their ages. He was not young. Had he not told her early in their acquaintance how he had, four years before, buried the wife of his youth? In a few months he would be thirty-two.

She interrupted him to say sharply that she was thirty-two, months ago, and that she did not believe in any such nearness of age, in marriage.

He ought to choose a wife who was at least five years his junior. In any case, whether he found her or not, it would make no difference to Hannah Sterns. She could not marry him under any circumstances; could not be persuaded to change her mind; if he waited a dozen years, it would make no difference. She should never marry. She had settled that matter once for all; and she had been so evidently annoyed by the whole matter that self-respect had made it necessary for the minister to retire with what dignity he could.

Hannah Sterns, the woman of forty, still holding the photograph, had the grace to be ashamed of herself for the manner of her refusal.

"I might have kept him for a friend," she said aloud with a sigh. "And then poor father would not have had to miss him so much those last years of his life. Father

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

could not understand why he did not come to see us, occasionally, even after he went several hundred miles away. It was good in him to keep up the correspondence as long as father lived. He was a good man. I don't mind keeping his picture. I'll put it down in the sitting room with the others. I'm sure I don't know how it ever got into this box. I wonder what sort of a woman he married, and if she is still living and has children? I might have had her for a friend, I presume, if I had not been so sharp and foolish. Why, here is a copy of a poem that Harlan Kingsbury made for me! Poor Harlan!"

She glanced through the neatly written pages, not giving her thought to the poem so much as to the one who had copied it. What a nice boy Harlan was! Would he like it if he knew that she was going to take his child to bring up? Or would he say, as she knew the neighborhood was saying, "What does an old maid know about bringing up children?" She did not blame them; it was a strange freak, for her. She did not fully understand why she was doing it. The boy, Harlan, had been in their family for a single winter, and had then and afterwards bestowed upon her the sort of worshipful friendship which young men of his type like to give to good women much older than

themselves. He had made her his confidante in his somewhat sorrowful love-affair, and she had meant to be a good friend to his wife. But it chanced that Harlan had married during that spring when Hannah was completely absorbed in her own affairs, and in the bitterness of the autumn and winter that followed she had let all trace of him slip away. Was her reaching after his baby a sort of atonement to the boy, Harlan, for forgetting him?

"If the child had had decent relatives to do for him," she said, with her usual crispness, "I don't suppose I should have interfered; but I was so indignant over that Orphan Asylum business, there didn't seem to be anything else to do."

The box was almost empty. Miss Hannah reached down for the few remaining papers, a keen sense of satisfaction possessing her over the thought that she had now safely emptied and put away one more article that might have haunted her with memories. She was prepared to turn over a new leaf and begin life afresh.

Her hand among the papers came in contact with something cold and hard, and she drew from it as suddenly as if it had stung her. She knew what the hard thing was, — a bit of coral broken off from a larger piece. Instantly she was back in the large, old-fashioned parlor that used to be cheery and was now always filled with shadows. She sat in the straight-

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

backed chair, — the one she had given to Mrs. Austin, — and Ben Ransom stood by the mantelpiece playing with a piece of coral, and breaking it; and it was the evening of the day in which he had stood with Lucy under the elm tree. All the stretch of intervening years was gone. Was she young again? As young as she was on the morning of that day, when she stood in the dining room watching Ben Ransom as he, unconscious of her gaze, made friendly chat with Lucy? All her heart had gone out to him that morning; she had believed that, in the kindness of his heart, he was detaining himself to put a little good cheer into Lucy's life, and she had admired him for it.

Oh, no; no, indeed! she was *old*, old and gray and hard. As old as she had felt when she saw his arm go around Lucy's waist and his lips press close to hers. She knew that from that moment she became an old woman. And the old woman knew then, and knew it eight years afterwards, that all the wealth of love which she could have lavished upon husband and home and family had been wasted upon Ben Ransom — poured out, and lost. Poor Miss Hannah!

How can it be accounted for that there is, every once in a while, a royal soul who wastes a wealth of love upon an unworthy object? Why, for instance, could not Miss Hannah's heart have been kept for that young minister, Ray

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

Prescott, who stood ready to give her royally and loyally all that there was in a sweet, strong soul, — instead of lavishing it upon a man who, even with an undivided heart, would have had one all too small to receive such wealth?

Yet that there are many Miss Hannahs, and Ben Ransoms, — yes, and Lucys, — peopling the world with mistakes and, at best, only half-way homes, one who is even a casual observer will be compelled to admit.

VIII.

HARLAN.

IT was by no means Hannah Sterns's belief, any more than it is that of any healthy soul, that there must needs be a ruined life, even after serious mistakes have been made. But that her life was dwarfed she knew only too well; that this was partly her own fault she was beginning dimly to realize. She ought not to have allowed Ben Ransom to narrow her human interests inside the four walls of her father's farm-house, so that, as the months passed, she lost her place in the outside world, and had no one whom she could heartily call "friend." Had she done differently, she might have made life pleasanter both for her father and grandmother while she had them. Why had she not seen it then?

Also, her heart was sore over what she had long feared was another mistake of hers. She had been so sure that it was Ben Ransom's duty to marry Lucy that she had given him no chance for escape. She had not for a moment imagined that he really wanted to

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

escape. Of course he wanted the girl; why else should he kiss and caress her? She could understand that his suit to herself might have been a matter of policy — a suggestion of Satan to a young man, to secure wealth and position at a single bound. But Lucy he had loved. Since she also loved him with all her young, foolish heart, and was a respectable girl, with a fair amount of common sense and a good deal of native shrewdness that would soon make up what she lacked in culture, why should she not develop into a woman of whom her husband could be proud?

Hannah Sterns had meant to help her. She had hurried the marriage because she had believed that it would be better for all of them to have so much irrevocably settled. After that she meant to do for them both all that a woman in her position could do; and they had given her no chance! Not once did the girl whose cause she had so thoroughly espoused come to say, as Hannah had expected that she would, "I owe my happiness to you."

Worse than that, not many months passed before there were rumors that there was very little happiness between those two whose fortunes Hannah Sterns had united. Ben Ransom began to be quoted as unpardonably careless of his wife's pleasure or comfort; as indulging in fits of moodiness; as being at times actually cross. There were even hints

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

that he had taunted her occasionally with her inferiority. There had been an angry light in Miss Sterns's eyes when she heard that last, and could she have believed that there was truth in it, she would have been able to convince herself that the man she had loved was not worthy of any woman's love.

But she charged much of the talk to gossips; still they had some foundation, enough to make her feel that she had made a grave mistake, that Mr. Ransom ought never to have married the poor girl. There were times when she questioned whether it could be possible that the man pledged to one woman and lavishing tenderness on another had cared for neither. Heretofore her world had been narrow and respectable; she had not known that there were such men.

Perhaps it will not be possible for people who do not know her well to realize what a humiliation it was to Miss Sterns to feel herself in any way associated with faithlessness to solemn pledges. A long line of ancestors noted, even among honorable people, for their rigid adherence to their pledged word had deepened this trait in her character, until it was with a sort of puzzled wonder that she asked herself: How could Benjamin Ransom, how could any man, having once taken vows upon himself, do other than try with all the force within him to live up to them? It must

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

be that he was trying. Perhaps that poor, little, untrained girl he had chosen did not know how to meet him halfway. She must be helped; and Hannah Sterns told herself firmly that she was the one to help her. There seemed to be no one else. She must put away pride and family dignity and force herself upon the girl, if necessary, and be her friend, help her in spite of herself, if need be, and save her life—save both their lives to home and honor. And then, just as she had reached this decision, they disappeared from her world. She went one day to the store in town and asked for Mr. Ransom's street and number, only to learn that two days before he had severed his connection with the store and moved away—moved out of town. They could not tell her where he had gone; not even the heads of the firm, whom she insisted upon seeing, could give her so much as a hint.

To be quite plain they told her, Mr. Ransom had not been giving full satisfaction of late, in fact, there had been a decided change in him, and not for the better. One of the partners had felt it necessary to have a serious talk with him, and he had resented it; had replied in a manner that was offensive; and then, without an hour's notice, had chosen to leave them at a time when he must have known it would especially inconvenience them. However, they had decided to make no effort to get him back, and

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

had heard but that morning that he had left the city. The utmost that they knew about it was that he had taken a west-bound through train, and that he had told one of their employees who chanced to meet him at the station that they were off for good.

With this Miss Sterns was compelled to be content. Diligent search, conducted of course in a quiet and circumscribed way, had failed to give her any clew to the whereabouts of the couple who had thus cast themselves aloof from their best friend; and she was compelled to that hardest of all tasks for an honest and active nature, the endurance of her own mistakes without making an effort to right them.

The black box was empty at last, save for that bit of coral. Miss Hannah remembered the morning that she had taken it from the mantel and rushed with it, as though it were a thing alive, to the black box and dropped it in, her only definite thought being that she must get it out of her sight. She reached for it presently, stood it on her table, and stared at it gravely. A poor broken thing, but it had been a family treasure for the sake of Grandfather Sterns's sailor boy. At last she took it in one resolute hand and her lamp in the other, went down the long halls and stairs that separated her from the parlor, and placed the broken bit beside the larger one where it had lain for years

and years. "There!" she said aloud. "That's done with, now I'll go to bed."

Several months from that time a very different scene was being enacted in Miss Sterns's room. Over in the dimmest corner, hands firmly clasped behind him, on his face a look of determination, and his whole attitude that of as resolute a rebel as ever wore kilts, stood Harlan Kingsbury, Jr., making as good an exhibition of the Kingsbury temper as a boy of four could well manage.

Instead of being "between two and three," as Mrs. Henry Collins had carelessly quoted him, young Harlan was nearing his fourth birthday when he reached Miss Hannah's home, and now had passed that anniversary. On the couch opposite him sat Miss Hannah, erect and motionless, watching her rebel. The floor, from the door to Miss Hannah's favorite chair, was thickly strewn with rose leaves, — red, and white, and pale yellow.

Nearly five months had passed since the Sterns farm-house had opened to receive the orphan — months of experience on Miss Hannah's part, such as she had not dreamed the world could have in store for her. In every sense of the word the coming of the new member of the family had meant an invasion.

Miss Hannah and her faithful helper and friend, Miranda, had settled it before his ad-

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

vent that they two, with nothing to do except keep the house in order, could take care of the child without any troublesome nurse girl "to pick up after." And to this new and wonderful task they had bent their energies; with what degree of success, only they two knew.

There were days when mistress and maid avoided each other's eyes and managed affairs so as to make a private interview impossible, lest each should have to own to failure.

Miss Hannah had theories with regard to the management of children. What woman of forty, especially if she be childless, has not?

Among other important lessons the boy must of course be taught to obey, not only that, but he must obey promptly. Miss Hannah declared that unquestioning and cheerful obedience must be the first law. She would have no lagging nor sulking about her. She had always thought that sulkiness in a child was of all things to be deplored. Of course this child must also be trained to the other virtues, — orderliness, quietness, respectfulness. Probably the poor boy had not received much training, since it seemed that, according to Mrs. Collins, his mother had always been an invalid; but she did not doubt her ability to make up to him all losses of this kind. Indeed, she went to sleep for several nights with visions of the model boy she was to bring up floating not unpleasantly before her mind.

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

But that was before Harlan Kingsbury arrived. Now, after almost five months of as careful teaching as ever a boy had, she sat before as determined a rebel as the country could produce. After five months of training in "unquestioning and cheerful obedience," he had stamped his small, strong foot and said, "I won't!" with as much firmness as six feet of manhood could have shown. More than that, he had said it two hours before, and had repeated the obnoxious word as often as the command had been re-issued.

Also, the first scene in this act of rebellion had taken place before breakfast, and the small rebel had not eaten a mouthful that day—to say nothing of Miss Hannah, who had nearly choked over her few mouthfuls of dry toast.

Let it be recorded that, for the first time in her life, Miss Hannah was at her wits' end. When, at stated periods, she left the small culprit to himself, in the hope that through solitude he might be led to consider the error of his ways, she wandered aimlessly about the house, unable to set herself at any of her usual employments, only one definite purpose being kept in mind,—to avoid Miranda.

Once she sought her well-filled book shelves, but looked in vain for any dissertation on child life that would tell her how soon there might be danger of starvation. The question haunting her was: Suppose the child should

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

continue to refuse to do her bidding? She had said he could have nothing to eat until he did; and he looked not one whit nearer the giving up than he had at the first moment. Suppose he should hold out! Had anybody ever heard of such a case? Miss Hannah stood aghast before the possibilities.

There was an alternative almost as awful to her soul as starvation; Miranda had suggested it nearly an hour before, or, rather, she had spoken it squarely in all its baldness.

"If I was you, I'd spank him."

Miss Hannah had recoiled from the words as if a hand had struck her. It happened that she had held all her life a deep-grained aversion to the mere thought of all such punishment. She had been known to say, with a firm setting of her lips that more than one embarrassed mother recalled, that a woman who could not manage a child without striking him as though he were a beast, had no business to have one to manage. On this trying morning she cast a withering glance upon Miranda as she said with dignity, "If he were a mule, I would; but since he is a human being—" Miranda finished the sentence for her.

"Well, I'm sure he is acting as much like a mule this morning as a critter with two legs could."

Miss Hannah went out of the room at once, but the disagreeable suggestion went with her.

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

Though living in the days when such methods of family discipline were almost universal, she had never been "spanked," her gentle mother seeming always able to manage satisfactorily, at least to herself, without this; the fact might have helped to account for her daughter's aversion to it. Yet she found herself asking more than once during that long-drawn-out morning whether or not it were possible that there might be exceptional cases in which it was really necessary to resort to such means.

Certainly all her theories of government were being sorely tested that morning. She saw herself involved in the intricacies of a problem which she could find no way to solve, and she had reached it by so insignificant a path that, if an important principle were not at stake, it could all have been overlooked. What, after all, were a few rose leaves? As it was, she was the victim of that self-accusing thought which many a mother will appreciate, "If I only hadn't made so much of it in the first place!"

Still she had not meant to make much of it. She had come in haste to her room, which had been left but an hour before in immaculate order, to find it strewn from door to window with rose leaves; and in the centre of this fragrant litter stood Harlan, his dark blue skirt quite wet, and his strong little shoes well plastered with damp earth. Nor did he look like

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

a repentant sinner; on the contrary, his face glowed with satisfaction.

Miss Hannah's words had been sharp and to the point. The evidence of both disobedience and wanton mischief were before her, and she made their enormity plain to him, closing with the following:—

“Now, young man, you may set to work and pick those rose leaves up, every one of them. I'll warrant you will find it harder than it was to scatter them, and not a mouthful of breakfast shall you have until every one is gathered.”

If at that moment she had been studying the culprit's face, she might have been bewildered by its rapid changes,—astonishment, disappointment, indignation, struggled for possession.

Indignation conquered and expressed itself, “Harlan *won't* pick them up!”

Thus had the issue been raised. Returning to her rebel after a longer absence than usual, and after she had painfully considered Miranda's advice, Miss Hannah found him in the corner where she had left him, and the moment his eyes rested on her, he clasped those naughty hands behind his back and repeated firmly that obnoxious word, “Harlan *won't*!”

Then a strange thing happened. Suddenly a sense of humiliating failure overwhelmed Miss Hannah. It seemed to her that each effort she had ever made for others had been

a mistake, resulting disastrously. What had become of that poor Lucy? Now, here was this boy whom she had — And then that strange thing happened. Miss Hannah, who very rarely shed tears, — never save in the privacy of her room with door locked and shades closely drawn, — felt them one after another rolling down her mortified face; and she hadn't even a handkerchief with which to protect herself.

A pair of keen eyes in the far corner saw them distinctly, and they worked an instant and marvellous change on his determined little face. He made a rush across the room, scattering rose leaves recklessly as he clambered to the couch, and rained kisses on Miss Hannah's eyes, on her nose, anywhere, talking eagerly the while.

"Don't cry, Aunt Hannah. I'll pick up every one. I won't be naughty any more. I made a path for you like the piccher," — it was Harlan's one baby word, — "I thought you'd like it. Tom gave them to me, out by the bars; but I'll pick every one up, and I won't be naughty ever any more."

Light began to dawn upon Miss Hannah's mind. The "piccher," — a colored print in an old magazine representing the children strewing the path of royalty with flowers. He had made a path of rose leaves for her! and he had not disobeyed, and picked the roses, but

had planned with Tom to gather them for him from the hedge. And she had been hard and cruel and —

Half an hour afterward, when Miranda knocked at the door and was bidden to enter, she saw a surprising scene. Two people sat prone on the floor among the rose leaves picking industriously, and talking.

“Oh, yes,” Aunt Hannah was saying, “there will be enough here for two rose pillows.”

“Well, well!” Miranda remarked to herself as she turned away from Miss Hannah’s door without saying the words she had come to say, “I guess it’s true that ‘there’s no fool like an old fool.’” Then she chuckled. But as soon as she was back at her pie-making she proceeded to make a little round pie in a saucer, with “HARLAN” pricked into the crust with a fork.

IX.

"ON GOOD GROUND."

IT was a little bit of a house, four-roomed indeed, though the owner thereof when he counted his wealth had a confusing way of enumerating.

"There's the sittin' room and dinin' room and bake room and kitchen, and the parlor and library and two sleepin' rooms; what more do two people want in the way of room? Margaret says sometimes that we'd ought to have a music room, but I tell her that when we get an instrument will be time enough to tack another room on." There was always a pleasant twinkle in his kindly eyes when he talked of his own affairs, and people who came to know him well learned to enjoy his little whimsicalities as heartily as they enjoyed everything else that had to do with him. They understood that the parlor and library and sitting room meant one cheery, homelike room with a generous fireplace in it, and that the other enumerations could be shrunk in the same way.

In plain language, the house was a four-roomed cabin set under the shadow of a great chestnut tree that was the special pride and

joy of the owners. The little weather-beaten, weather-stained house had never yet reached a season so prosperous that it had taken on a long-promised coat of paint, yet every year it was cheerfully prophesied, "Next fall I guess we can paint." But the weather stains were nowhere visible, for loving Mother Nature, helped by a loving woman's fingers, had so skilfully intertwined the vines that grew and clambered all over the house that one thought only of their beauty.

In the good-sized, cheerful sitting room of this little prairie home, toward the closing of a winter's day, sat three people. The host and hostess and their "pastor," as they delighted to call the tall, broad-shouldered man who had spent spring and summer and part of the winter in the little village adjoining the farm. He had come to them in search of health after a prostrating illness, not expecting to do any preaching for a long time to come. But, as the farmer gleefully put it: "We've got climate here if we haven't anything else. We sell our climate at so much a cubic inch and throw the land in, and the minister couldn't stay sick in it nohow; he had to go to preaching to keep himself ballasted." His hearty, infectious laugh that punctuated most of his sentences rang out, and the minister joined in it, grateful for renewed health and for the Providence that had given him such friends during his invalid-

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

ism as David and Margaret Ransom. He was well now, and must very soon leave them, and he counted as privileges to be treasured in his memory those evenings spent in their cheerful sitting room.

"Yes," David Ransom was saying as he carefully lifted his left leg and crossed it over the right one, while he gazed reflectively into the fire, "yes, I own that I have what you may call a kind of hankering after a watch. I always had it, and always looked forward to owning one. As far back as I can remember anything I can remember father's big silver watch. It was an uncommonly good one, even for those days when they used to make things better than they do now, and it kept time like the sun. The neighbors used to have their little joke at father about it. 'Uncle David,' some one would call out, — they always called him 'Uncle David,' not that we had relations in these parts, but he was that kind of a man, you know, friendly and neighborly, — 'Uncle David,' some one would say of a cloudy day, 'how is it that you didn't have the sun rise this morning? We were sort of depending on you, and we haven't seen him to-day.' Then father would give one of his big, friendly laughs and say, 'Oh, he's all right; rose on time just as usual; the reason you didn't see him was because you were looking at the clouds.' It wasn't easy to get ahead of father; and he

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

wasn't one who looked much at clouds, though he had plenty of them in his life."

David Ransom's tone had already become reflective, and there was a quiet little sigh heaved, because of the clouds in his father's life.

"And the watch was to be yours some day, was it?" asked the minister, who scented a story in the distance, and wanted it. He had the keen interest in David Ransom's stories which belongs to a student of human nature.

"Oh, yes," said David, "that it was. 'I'll leave it in my will, Davie, that you are to have the watch,' father would say; and then he'd laugh, because it didn't seem likely to him that he would ever have anything that would need a will. He was a rich man, father was; but he hadn't the kind of riches that you can *will* to others, more's the pity. He never made any will, not on paper; but it was well enough understood that the watch was to be mine when he got through with it. He spoke of it the night before he died — took it for granted, you know, that it was mine. It was hanging up near his bed so that he could tell the time, and I was fixing things for the night. We had no kind of notion that he was worse than he had been, and he says to me, 'David,' says he, 'don't forget to wind your watch; that'll be your work after this. I've got done with it.'"

There was silence in the room for several minutes. It was now nearly twenty years

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

since David Ransom's father went away, yet there was a quality in his son's voice and a look on his face when he spoke of that last night which made the minister sit in respectful, sympathetic quiet. His father, too, had gone away, and he understood better than some.

"So there was a time when you had a watch?" he said at last in an insinuating tone. "I suppose it wore out, as watches will?"

"Oh, no," said David Ransom, quickly. "I don't think it could have worn out; it was a well-made watch. Father used to think it would be good for a hundred years. I hope it is going all right. You see, I let Ben have it — lent it to him, you know. Ben needed a watch a good deal more than I did, of course; he was going away from home, and I was right here where the old clock is."

As he spoke he glanced up cheerfully at the quaint old family heirloom, a moon-faced clock in a wooden case. The minister knew that it had long ceased to be relied upon for time, but they all maintained a respectful silence about that.

"Ben meant to send it back to me after a few years, as soon as he got able to buy one; but he hasn't yet, and I think maybe he can't. It costs a good deal to live, more than Ben understood. He was only a boy when he set out for himself, and there was a good many lessons he had to learn. I can't help hoping

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

that the old watch is doing him good service yet. He knows I'd want him to keep it as long as he needed it."

"Where is your brother, Mr. Ransom?"

At this question the rugged face shadowed.

"I wish I could tell you," he said gravely. "That is our trouble, mother's and mine. You see he was so much younger than we that it kind of seems to us as though he was our boy wandering around the world all by himself. It is more than five years since we heard a word from him — oh, a good deal more than five years. Ben never was any hand to write letters, but at first he used to write two or three times a year. He had pretty hard ploughing, I'm afraid, though he didn't exactly complain when he wrote; but if he had been doing well we think we should have heard from him oftener, and anyhow he would have sent back the watch, you know. He promised to do that."

The minister did not feel fully convinced of the soundness of this logic, but he kept silence. It seemed a pity to have to confess, in the presence of a man like David Ransom, to one's belief that there were men in the world who had no regard for promises.

The shadow still rested on the good man's face, and his naturally cheerful voice grew sad.

"I can't seem to feel right about poor Ben. He was nothing but a baby, you see, when I was a grown man; and after father died

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

I ought to have kept an eye on him. I meant to — we meant to act exactly as though he was our son instead of our brother, didn't we, mother? But he wouldn't stay with us. He never took to farming, and he had been so kind of unhappy and restless, like a fish out of water, for a year or so before father died, that I thought maybe it would do him good to get out and have a little brush with the world. I thought he'd come back, and so I didn't urge him to stay with us as much as I might. Still, mother had a talk with him about it, and I thought if she couldn't coax him to stay, there wasn't much use in trying. I've been sorry, though, a hundred times, especially since we haven't heard anything from him. Seems to me I might have done something more."

At this point, Mrs. Ransom spoke for the first time without staying her swift-flying needle:—

"I'm sure, David, I don't see what more you could have done. I don't think you have any call to reproach yourself. You helped him as well as you knew how, and gave him every cent of money you had."

"Oh, no," said David Ransom, quickly, "I didn't give it to him; he just took it, for his share of the farm."

"I know," said Mrs. Ransom; "but I mean you couldn't have done any more for him then,

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

except to let him have his share in money, and you haven't any reason to feel bad over it, as I can see." Husband and wife exchanged swift glances of understanding, which on her part could have been translated into:—

"I never meant to tell that it took every cent of money you had earned and saved up, and that there has never been a day since that we could have sold this poor little farm for half that amount." And on his part: "No, I know you don't mean to tell. Ben thought it was the best way, and maybe it was; anyhow, we've lived through it, and whatever trouble we had because of it, we will always keep to ourselves."

The minister, who had heard from outsiders something about the headstrong boy who had refused to be directed or even advised by his older brother, determined to turn the current of thought into a different channel.

"So you are really going to have a watch now, for the first time, Mr. Ransom?"

The kindly blue eyes travelled back from some unknown region, and the shadow lifted a little. David Ransom spoke briskly:—

"Yes, pastor, I am, at last. You see, a watch kind of took the form of a parting gift from father, and that is the reason I have wanted one very particularly, though I do need it, of course, now that I have to go to town so much. I mean to get it as much like

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

the other one as I can — big, you know, and bright, of course; and I hope I can get a good loud ticker. Father's watch was a great ticker. Some nights I had to put it out in this room and shut the bedroom door, because he'd take a notion that it disturbed him; but most of the time he liked its company. They don't make as big watches as they used to, do they, pastor? I've always wanted a big one, and I meant to call it father's present and have it to hand down to my child, same as he did, if Providence ever gave us a child. I've been hanging on to that plan a good many years. Do you suppose I can get a big one now?"

"Oh, I think so. They are a trifle old-fashioned, as you say, but none the worse for that; in fact, I think you can get one more reasonably on that account. I wish I were able to go with you to-morrow and help you select one. You wouldn't like to wait until next week, I suppose?"

Mr. Ransom stirred in his chair a little uneasily and looked over at his wife, who shook her head; then they both laughed.

"You see, pastor," said the husband, "I guess we are getting a little childish over this thing, mother and me. It has been going on for so many years that mother, I believe, is getting a bit superstitious. 'If you don't get started this time,' says she, 'I don't believe you ever will. Now, David, don't you let any-

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

thing short of a cyclone or the smallpox hinder you from getting off to-morrow morning.'”

The minister laughed almost as heartily as his host could do.

“Then don't you be coaxed out of it,” he said. “I couldn't do you the least good in the world, and it isn't wise to wait. I might not be able to go next week even. But I am very much interested in that watch. May I call and get a look at it to-morrow night? What was the matter with your other starts? What stopped you? Or didn't you ever get so far as to have a day set?”

David Ransom let both feet rest on the floor, placed his great hands on his knees, and rocked back and forth in glee.

“My eyes!” he said. “‘Day set?’ more than a dozen times! If I was a writer, I could make a big book about the days I have planned to go for that watch of mine. Some of 'em would make good stories, too — I mean some of the things that happened about that time. You remember the foreign man, mother?”

Mrs. Ransom glanced up from the patch she was setting on her husband's much worn shirt and nodded sympathetically.

“A ‘foreign man’?” quoted the minister. “Who was he, and what could he have to do with your watch?”

“He had lots to do with it. He was a travelling preacher. Well, that is, I mean he

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

was a missionary from foreign parts; but he was travelling about just then, telling people what was needed, and raising money for it. My eyes, pastor, if you could have heard some of his stories! You remember that one, mother, about the little baby girl tossed out to die? Thrown away, like a dog or a cat — oh, worse than that! There's lots of people who will take good care of cats and dogs, and I don't like to see them ill-treated myself; but a baby — oh, my! That pretty nearly killed mother and me. We used to lie awake nights and talk it over, and I took to dreaming about them. We hitched up and drove to town that evening to hear him talk; it was a rainy evening, too, and just a few people there, but he talked all the same. And when that story came about the little girl baby six or seven months old, why — I looked at mother and she looked at me, and I nodded, and she said, just as plain as though she had spoken it right out in words, 'There goes the watch money.'"

"I knew you would give it," interposed Mrs. Ransom, in the tone of one well satisfied to predict such doings of her husband.

"Why, of course," said David Ransom, cheerfully, "there wasn't anything else for us to do. Father was always interested in foreign missions. He took a missionary paper, or kind of a book it was, that came once a month, and I used to think he learned everything in it by

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

heart. He was a well-informed man, father was, but there wasn't any subject that interested him more than foreign missions. I suppose I have heard him say fifty times, if I have once, that folks in this country knew all about the gospel, or if they didn't it was because they didn't want to know; but that in foreign lands it was different. That there were hundreds and thousands of folks there who had never even heard of Jesus Christ — seems dreadful, doesn't it? And the worst thing about it is that it is so yet, after all these years. My eyes! doesn't seem as though we ought to stan' that. Well, as far back as I can remember anything, I can remember the money being laid aside in a box for foreign mission Sunday. That was the way I was brought up. And father kept on with it after we came out West and had hard years, and dreadful little money; he always had something to give to missions. Of course my wife and I began in the same way; even if we hadn't wanted to give for ourselves, we wouldn't have gone back on father and mother. We had given our regular for that year, and our mite of a thank-offering at New Year's besides; but we couldn't stan' that baby. I was going to town the very next week — you remember, Margaret? and we had eleven dollars tied up in a stocking foot that we had been saving for — well we won't say for how long, ever since the last time, to get the watch. But

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

Margaret put it all into a nutshell on the way home. Says she, 'If the Lord had given us a dear little girl baby, we'd have loved it and worked for it, yes, and died for it, rather than have it come to harm; and I think we ought to give some kind of a thank-offering because we have hearts made of flesh and blood, instead of such hearts as that poor baby's folks must have.' Wasn't that a telling way to put it, pastor? I wouldn't have thought of it in a hundred years; but I can say amen to mother's thoughts. Those eleven dollars started for India before the week was out; and we've never been sorry, have we, mother? It is curious, pastor, how you ain't sorry, hardly ever, about what you give. I've laid awake nights over things that I've had, and lost, and over things that I wanted and couldn't get; but I never lost a wink of sleep over what I had given."

X.

AN INTERRUPTED STORY.

“SO your watch went to India that time,” said the minister; “what became of it next?”

David Ransom bent himself nearly double in laughter.

“How did you know there was a ‘next time’?” he asked. “But there was, there were dozens of ‘em. Why, the *very* next time it was home missions. That was queer, too, wasn’t it? You see, I had felt kind of sorry afterward about its all going for foreign missions; it seemed like going back on mother: she was great for home missions, mother was. She and father used to argue it some — not that he was ever against them in the world, but he was a little mite more interested in the foreign part. Mother would say: —

“‘Don’t you know, David, our orders were to begin at Jerusalem?’

“‘Oh, yes,’ says father, ‘that’s all right, but it doesn’t say stay there.’ So they always ended by dividing up; and it made me feel

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

kind of sorry that we didn't. But I never said a word about it, not even to my wife; my feeling about it was that it was over and done, and there wasn't any use in making others uncomfortable with fussing over it. Well, we went on for about a year and a half, and all sorts of things happened to hinder us from getting our watch-money together. Watches went up, too; I couldn't hear of a good one for less than fifteen dollars. It seemed a great deal to pay, just for a watch, and I guess I should have given it up for good if it hadn't been for mother here. She kept it going in her mind, was sort of set on it, you know, and kept saving up in all sorts of odd little ways that she didn't think I'd notice, and of course I had to try to help her, and at last we had it again. My eyes! I remember that morning that she dropped the last nickel into the stocking as well as though it was yesterday.

"'Now,' says she, as she tied up the stocking foot, 'there 'tis, and mind you don't go to giving it this time for any thank-offering or any other kind of offering.' Them was her very words. I was to go to town the next day but one. I couldn't go the next day because we had promised to go out to Deacon Potter's for dinner. You don't know Deacon Potter? His folks all moved away the year before you come out here; a terrible loss it was to the neighborhood, too, and the church. We've had

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

dreadful losses in the church, pastor, right along. It isn't any wonder we were all discouraged when you come out here and begun to preach to us. Seems to me if I was a minister and had done as much good in a few months as you have here, I should 'most *have* to stay and see it go on."

"But my church is waiting for me in the East, brother," said the minister, a note of sadness and half-regret in his voice.

David Ransom heaved a great sigh.

"So 'tis," he said. "I keep forgetting that, and I s'pose you've got to go. I s'pose we couldn't keep you anyhow, but it's the biggest heartache we've had, to let go of you."

His faded blue eyes swam in tears as he spoke, and the minister felt his own eyes grow suddenly dim. He made haste to bring his host back to the story.

"You were going to tell me about the dinner party."

"Oh, yes, at Deacon Potter's. Why, Mrs. Potter had a sister who married a home missionary, and her niece, the sister's daughter, was visiting them. She had been teaching in a mission school away off in the mountains, and Mrs. Potter thought mother and me would like to hear her tell about it, so they asked us to come to dinner. Well, of all the talkers we ever heard in our lives that young woman could beat them! — You remember her, mother?"

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

Stories! my eyes! and we kept her at it, before dinner and after dinner, and for supper, and along late in the evening, we just had stories about those mountain girls and boys. You ought to have been there, pastor, you like stories so well, and she could tell them something like."

"I can imagine your interest," said the minister; "she was teaching among the mountain whites, I suppose? There is no mission field that to me is more full of thrilling interest than that."

"Isn't it wonderful? I had missed it all, somehow; found I didn't know anything about their schools; and the stories she told about how they lived, and worked, and scraped, and saved, just to get chances to learn to read and write — great big boys, you know, and girls, almost men and women, and not knowing how to write even! — why it scared me, it actually did, pastor. I felt as though I was to blame somehow for letting such things be. Maybe I felt it a little more because I had always wanted chances myself. Father never knew how hard it was for me to give up school and go to work; of course he didn't, it would have been mean if he had; he couldn't help it, you see, and of course I didn't let on when my duty was as plain as A B C, and there wasn't anything to gain by talking it over; but it made me all the more determined that Ben should have his

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

chance, and when I heard about those great, full-grown men and women who never had been to school, it kind of choked me. Mother, here, felt it, too — felt it more than I did, I dare say, because she was a scholar; she had not only been to school a good deal, but she had taught school for three winters. I don't know as you knew that, pastor?"

Mr. Ransom paused to give the wonderful words time to be absorbed, and looked impressively at the minister; but his wife made haste to say, a vivid color in her cheeks the while: —

"Oh, never mind that, David; that was long ago, and I wasn't much of a teacher, anyway."

"The neighborhood didn't think so," said David Ransom, impressively; "they tell yet about how you managed some of the bad boys."

The minister felt a warm glow of satisfaction over the words he was about to speak.

"Oh, yes," he said heartily. "I know all about Mrs. Ransom's school. Only yesterday I met one of farmer Patterson's sons on his way to New York; he is a teacher, you know, in the East, and he told me that his first interest in mathematics, of which he is now a most successful teacher, was awakened in the old weather-beaten schoolhouse in the Butler district when Mrs. Ransom was teaching there. 'She is the best teacher I ever had,' he said emphatically, and you know he is a college-bred man."

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

"There!" said David Ransom, bringing his strong fist down with emphasis on his knee, while his whole face glowed with delight; "hear that, will you! what did I tell you, mother?"

"Go on with your story, David," said Mrs. Ransom, with an apologetic little laugh, her face bright the while; it was pleasant to her to hear words of praise from her husband's lips.

"Oh, the *story*, why, there wasn't much of a story, not that I can tell. If you could have heard some of hers! I agreed with mother that girls ought to have chances as well as boys. We had both said a hundred times that if Providence should ever give us a little girl, she should have just exactly as good a chance in the world as our little boy, if Providence should ever give us a little boy. I s'pose it was feeling like this that made the stories take such powerful hold of us.

"They had to keep turning the young folks off that wanted to learn, because they hadn't money enough to feed them; and she told about one girl named Priscilla who walked seventeen miles over the mountains to get to the school, and who said she would live on two corn-meal cakes a day, just little cakes made of meal and water, if they would only let her stay and learn, and they couldn't do it, and she sat down flat on the ground and cried like

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

a baby when they told her. That took us hard."

It was, evidently, still taking him hard. He drew out his handkerchief and blew a stormy blast on his nose, and his voice was husky.

"You see, pastor, Priscilla was my mother's name, and my wife and I had agreed that if Providence ever gave us a little girl she was to be named Priscilla, for mother. I s'pose it will sound kind of foolish to you, but I couldn't get away from the notion that that was our little Priscilla sittin' there on the ground crying. Then there was another queer thing about it. Somebody asked her what it cost to keep a girl in school for a whole year, and she said thirty dollars would do it.

"'Thirty dollars!' says I, over to myself; and I looked at mother and saw she was saying the same identical thing that I was: that if thirty dollars would give her a year's schooling, fifteen would give half a year, and we had fifteen dollars tied up in a stocking foot to go for a watch, and our little Priscilla sitting there on the ground crying! Could we stan' that, pastor?

"We never said a word about it there, not a word. But that night when we was driving home, mother, she up and says the strangest thing.

"'Sometimes,' says she, 'I can't help feeling sorry that we didn't divide that thank-

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

offering of ours between home and foreign, and had your mother more counted in.' Now, wasn't that strange, when I had had just the same feelings, and we'd never either of us said a word? I call that a Providence. Isn't it, pastor?"

The minister bowed, hearty interest and sympathy glowing on his expressive face, and David went on:—

"I says to her, then, 'Maybe that little Priscilla'—and I didn't get any farther, I kind of choked all up; and I see there wasn't much need for words, because mother understood.

"'You're right,' I says to her, 'just as you always are. We can wait for our watch a great deal better than Priscilla can for her school; she shall have six months of it, anyhow, and she's a smart little thing and can learn a good bit in that time; don't let's have her wait another day,' and we didn't."

"He puts it on to me," said the smiling wife, "but he did it himself."

"That makes two capital stories," said the minister. "But you said there were dozens of them; give us one more."

David Ransom looked with tender eyes upon his wife, then turned to the minister with a broad smile on his rugged face as he arose slowly from his chair and straightened his great length toward the low ceiling.

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

"I reckon I've told stories enough," he said. "It is time to pop some corn now. I don't deny that there are more stories about that curious watch of mine, lots of 'em. Some of 'em we don't tell even to our pastor, do we, mother? It has had an eventful life, that watch has—a roving kind of a one, you may say; but I reckon it is coming home this time. I ain't hardly lifted a finger about it, either; mother and the three speckled hens and the yellow duck have had it about all their own way. Watches have gone up, too, they tell me. It will take every cent of seventeen dollars this time, they say, to get one; but mother has counted it out in hard cash, and if you come in to-morrow evening, I guess you'll hear father's watch ticking next my heart."

The minister drew his own watch at the moment and arose hastily. He had not realized the lateness of the hour. He could not wait for pop-corn this time, he told them. He ought to be at home that moment; and they should be in bed, getting strength for the eventful to-morrow. He was certainly coming out in the evening to see the watch.

Mrs. Ransom had finished the patching, and she too arose and held out her toil-roughened hand toward the minister, looking with eyes that were almost pathetically anxious into his sympathetic ones.

"It doesn't seem as though there could be

a slip this time," she said. "Father has been near it so many times and missed it that I'm afraid I'm getting superstitious; seems as though I *couldn't* have it miss again. A watch kind of belongs to a man, I think; and then, being it was his father's gift, of course that makes us set great store by it. I don't know but it will seem queer to you, but if you don't think it would be wrong to pray about a thing like that, I feel as though I'd like real well to have you."

"I shall certainly pray about it," said the minister, heartily. "There is nothing in the least queer in doing so. I will ask the Lord to prosper your husband every step of his way, and give him just the help he needs to accomplish that which will be in every way best for him and for you."

As the minister mounted his horse that night and rode away in the darkness toward the village, he felt that he had just parted company with two of the choicest souls he had ever known, and that the Providence on whom they reverently depended must have very gracious things yet in store for such as these, and that he could pray in faith.

He rode slowly, though the night was cold; the road was not at its best, and he allowed his horse to pick his way and choose his own gait, while he gave himself up to the luxury of melancholy. Why shouldn't he allow himself

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

some lonesome thoughts in view of the fact that in three more weeks he should be parted forever, in all probability, from these two royal souls whom he had found, or, rather, who had found him during those early weeks of prostration and foreboding, and had helped him back to health and strength, partly through the tonic of their own simple, trustful living. He had come to them, worn out bodily and mentally, with a feeling that his life work was done, and that it had not been worth the doing. Now, after eight months, he was going back to his work with every nerve in his body thrilling with renewed strength and vigor, and with a firm belief that he was better able to cope with the problems of his work than ever before, and he knew that those two simple-hearted people had helped him mightily. But how sorely he should miss them!

It came to him that evening with renewed force, the strangeness of it, that he, a middle-aged man, minister of the gospel and pastor of one of the leading churches of an Eastern city, with hosts of friends and literally hundreds of beautiful homes glad to welcome him, should look upon that plain, low-ceiled living room, with its wide-mouthed fireplace, and its old-fashioned, high-backed, wooden rockers, as the homiest place this side of heaven. What a strange thing it was, that he, Ray Prescott, forty years old, should have no home ties!

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

There had been a home once, and a wife of his youth; but it was twelve years since he had laid her away in the grave, and their life together had been so brief, scarcely five months, and then twelve lonely years.

He had not thought that it would be so. There had been another, a friend of his maturer years, of whom he had been sure that God meant them to do His work together. But when he spoke of it to her with a confidence, the memory of which made his face flush even now, she had seemed almost insulted at the thought. That was years ago, and he had never seen her since, and had never married. He settled it, after that experience, that love, and home, and ties, such as bound other men, were not for him; and he gave himself to his work with such entire abandonment that the result, after a few years, was so complete a breakdown as to afford small hope of recovery. Yet here he was, well and strong, and his church waiting for him.

It seemed too bad to go back to that loyal, loving church, with the thought in his heart that he was leaving his best friends behind in the little farm-house. But he knew that he should miss them as he had missed few others.

"Ah, well," he said at last, rousing from his reverie, and talking to his horse, as he had a habit of doing.

"Never mind, Selim, even though you and

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

I must part, too, good friend, we have three pleasant weeks together yet, and we won't borrow loneliness. We must quicken our pace, Selim ; Mrs. Scott doesn't approve of these late hours for you and me."

As a matter of fact, the parting was at the door. The minister found awaiting him a telegram that set him at hurried packing, and in the gray of the next early morning the East-bound train carried him away. So little do we know about our everyday affairs, for which, nevertheless, we plan as though we were sure of carrying out our designs.

XI.

A MARKED DAY.

THE waiting-room at the junction was crowded with travellers. Among them was David Ransom, who must wait two hours for the express train. He had come thus far on his journey by the early morning accommodation and was watching with interest the tide of human life which continually flowed through this thoroughfare. A journey to the great city, even a trip to the junction twenty miles away from home, was an event in David Ransom's life. He and Margaret had talked over the probabilities of his finding what he wanted in this bustling junction town which was really growing into a city by itself. David had been of the opinion that it was city enough for him, but Margaret had not approved.

"You don't buy a silver watch every day," she reminded him; "I think you ought to go to the biggest city there is; besides, Joel Williams's son is there, you know, and he can give you some advice." This last consideration convinced David, and he was enjoying the waiting

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

with the zest of a man who loved humankind and saw little of it.

A narrow life his would have been called by those who knew him on the surface. A small farmer living three miles from a small Western village that had never boomed. Getting his daily bread, and not very much more, from year to year out of crabbed ground that was worn with crops and lack of food, never being able to earn what in any sense of the word could be called a surplus, often straitened for what most people call the necessities of life, what had David Ransom and his wife to help them to be broad-minded?

Only the minister—who had in a short time come into close touch with them—and a few others knew that these two elderly people on their lonely prairie farm lived lives that were daily swept by the sweet winds of the other country, broadened and deepened by the continual fellowship of One who came not as a Guest but an abiding Presence. Happy were the people who could claim as friends those two royal souls who lived so close to the centre of Life. Yet very few knew what treasures of friendship lay hidden in the unpretentious farmhouse.

To those acquainted with David Ransom his face, as he sat quietly among the throngs at the junction, was a study. This day marked an epoch in his life. At last he was fairly started

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

on his errand to secure his father's parting gift. Seventeen dollars, price of unnumbered days of toil and proof of many little sacrifices, were securely pinned to his innermost pocket, having first been placed in a strong drilling bag made for the purpose. Margaret, as she pinned it into place, had counselled him : —

"Now, father," — it was noticeable and amusing to some that these childless ones, who had never heard the tender names lisped by child of theirs, had fallen into the habit of addressing each other by the terms which had been precious to their own childhood.

"Now, father, remember that you are not to get turned off the track this time by anything, home or foreign. This money is to go for your father's watch and nothing else under heaven. It does seem to me, as I told the minister, that I couldn't stand it to be disappointed again."

"You won't be, mother; I feel it in my bones that you'll hear the critter ticking when I kiss you to-night. My eyes ! seems to me I can hear it now. I didn't know I was so fond of it."

As he sat in the station watching the restless company that was forever moving through the rooms, David Ransom from time to time laid a hand furtively on his left breast to make sure that the unusual protuberance was quite safe, then glanced about him nervously, as though

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

aware that the movement might have given away his secret.

More than one among the waiting groups turned for a second glance at the clean-shaven, neatly dressed old man with his bright watching eyes and kindly face. More than one stranger said to a companion : —

“What a nice-looking man! He doesn't seem like the rest of the people, someway.”

From time to time men passed who knew the small farmer who occasionally came even as far as the junction with his produce, and nodded to him in friendly fashion, calling him by name. On one of these occasions a small pale woman, rather shabbily dressed, who had taken a seat, some time before, not far from where David was standing, looked up with a startled air and gave him closest scrutiny. After that, she hovered near him. When he went near to the ticket office to note the hour, she followed eagerly as one who had reached a decision and had no time to lose. Yet when close to him, she fell back a little and simply watched his face. When he went back to the long seat near the door, she went also, and seemed on the verge of speaking to him, then she changed her mind, and took her seat nearly opposite him, where she could watch without attracting attention. All the time she carried, close wrapped in her arms, a bundle that looked less shabby than she did herself. As for

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

David Ransom, he had not noticed her at all.

By and by the bundle in the shabby woman's arms began to move, to twist about in an unmistakable manner, to sit up, and finally to look about it with interested eyes. Then David Ransom took notice. There was never a baby in the same room with him that he did not see. This one had apparently had but a few months' acquaintance with this world, but had made good use of her opportunities. Her eyes were large and bright, and she looked about with the air of one who believed that there were many things worth looking at.

David Ransom smiled on her, and chirruped to her, being rewarded by a ravishing smile in return. Then he noticed the shabby little mother, and instantly felt sorry for her. She had large eyes, like her baby's, and she looked to him as though she needed a friend.

"What is your baby's name?" he asked her, when his movements had made the little one laugh aloud.

She seemed startled by the question, and hesitated.

"We haven't exactly named her," she said. "I mostly call her just Baby. She isn't very old, about nine months, going on ten."

"She is young to be taking a journey," said David, "but she seems to like it," he added, as the little creature bubbled over again into laughter.

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

"Do you live about here, ma'am?" There was a wistful feeling in the old man's heart that he would like to have Margaret see this baby with pretty eyes and winsome smiles. Again that startled look came into the mother's eyes.

"Oh, no," she said quickly. "We live a good ways off; we have come a long journey, Baby and I. But she is real good on the cars; she doesn't cry at all."

At that moment the West-bound express whistled and shrieked its way down the track and rolled into the station. The shabby little mother started up nervously and looked about her.

"Is this your train?" David Ransom asked. "Are you going West? This is the morning accommodation. There's a fast train at noon, if you are going far."

"How d'you do, Mr. Ransom?" said a man as he passed. "Going home on this train?" The shabby woman listened eagerly.

"No, Mr. Jones, I'm going in to the big city to-day. I don't expect to get home until seven o'clock. If you want this train, ma'am, you'll have to hurry; it doesn't stop here long."

"No," said the shabby mother, breathlessly, "it isn't my train. But I've left my bag back there on the other track where I came in. I laid it down on the shelf by the window while I was fixing Baby, and I've come off without it. Would you mind holding Baby for me a

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

minute while I run for it? I needn't be gone but just a second."

"Oh, yes, I'll hold her," David Ransom said, his voice a trifle eager in spite of himself; he longed to feel the little creature in his arms. Then a sacrifice occurred to him.

"But maybe I better go and get your bag for you; it is quite a piece over to the other station. Wouldn't that be easier for you?"

"Oh, no!" she said eagerly. "You wouldn't know where to look for it, but I know where I must have left it; I hope no one has taken it; it was full of Baby's things. I won't be but a minute." As she spoke she vanished through the doorway, for David already had the animated little bundle in his eager arms.

They were very happy together, those two. Baby patted his cheek and reached for his glasses and pulled a stray lock of gray hair with her mites of fingers, and it made David Ransom laugh to think how much strength they had in them.

The train, after making its usual erratic movements, backing a few rods, then returning and backing again for no apparent reason but its own amusement, suddenly reached a decision and rushed noisily off toward the West. Large numbers of the waiting people went with it.

The minutes passed, five, — ten, fifteen; soon it was nearly half an hour since the baby's mother went away.

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

"Poor critter!" said David Ransom to himself, "I'm afraid she can't find her bag; I'm 'most afraid she can't ever find it, and I suppose it would be a big loss to her."

Baby was growing restless. Her new nurse changed her position with awkward tenderness, and trotted her gently up and down while he whispered loving little words into her perfect ear. She condescended to be pleased, and smiled again, but of course this sort of thing could not go on much longer. The East-bound train arrived at last, made a very brief stay, and departed without David Ransom. He felt very sorry, and reflected mournfully that he should now have nearly two hours less in the great city than he had planned; but there was no help for it, — of course he could not leave Baby. Perhaps a watch could be bought in much less time than he had arranged for. In any case there was nothing to worry about, for he was doing the best he could, and he felt sure that Margaret would say so when she heard the story. He wrapped Baby's long cloak carefully about her, and took a slow observant walk down the length of the room. Of this, she approved. The East-bound train had thinned the people out; comparatively few were left. It was easy to make sure that Baby's mother was not among them. David Ransom fumbled carefully for his handkerchief and wiped the perspiration from his forehead as the thought occurred to

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

him that she might have attempted to cross the track by a platform of the East-bound train and been carried off with it. In that case, what was to be done? It was characteristic of the man that his predominant thought in connection with such an accident was pity for the mother, who could not know that he would lose all the trains there were to be had that day rather than desert her baby.

At last a policeman was found and interviewed. He gave the troubled man a shrewd look, then whistled softly.

"You're in for it, I reckon," were the amazing words he said. "She played her game well, I must say."

But David Ransom's eyes still asked questions.

"Why, she's off and the young one is on; that's about the size of it."

"I — I don't think I understand," faltered David. "You mean that the woman —" then he stopped.

"I mean that she's skipped, that woman has, and left her baby on your hands. I reckon she thought you had a soft spot in your heart that would serve her a good turn. Anyhow, she's tried it on."

A look of horror joined the bewilderment in David Ransom's eyes. "You don't mean that she has gone away *on purpose* and left her little baby?"

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

"That's the size of it, I guess. It's a purpose that she planned with care, I reckon. It ain't the first time it's been done in this very station. I generally manage to keep watch of suspicious-looking females; but there was such a crowd this morning going to the show that I got caught. Well, it's lucky for you that we've got a Foundling Hospital that's handy. It ain't more than a mile from here. I'll get word to them right away to send for the young one."

"The Foundling Hospital?" faltered David Ransom. "That is where —"

"It's where they take care of young ones that are deserted by their natural protectors," explained the policeman. "They feed 'em and look after 'em generally until they get adopted, or got rid of somehow."

"Buried, for instance," chuckled a station lounge, who had shuffled up, with his hands in his pockets, to enjoy the excitement. "They have the most amazing lot of funerals out there that I ever see! seems as though the burying-places would get filled up with babies after a while."

"Well," said the policeman, "what could you expect? Abandoned babies have never had the best kind of care, you can calculate. Of course they die off like sheep. Have you looked to see if that young one hasn't a tag about her somewhere to show that she has been left a-purpose? They generally see to that."

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

With fingers that trembled David put back the long cloak to examine. The policeman attempted to help, but this the baby resented, and the old man instinctively drew her away from the other's touch. Yes, there it was, a bit of paper, on which was traced in pencil in a feminine hand — "I know you will be good to her."

"Oh, yes!" sneered the policeman. "It's mighty little you care whether he is or not, so that you get well rid of her. Miserable set! if folks that shirk their young ones could be caught and hanged, the world would be better off. In my opinion it's a good thing that the young ones die. What could they be expected to grow up to, with such a start? Are you going East, Mr. Ransom? Then you've another hour to wait; but if you want to get rid of the young one, the station-master's girl will look after it until the nurse comes. You'd rather keep her, eh? All right; she seems to take to you, that's a fact."

"Soft chap that," said the station loungee, as David Ransom moved with his charge to the other side of the room. The policeman smiled grimly.

David Ransom selected a sheltered corner, made a pillow out of his mittens and handkerchief for the bobbing head, held the mite of a hand in his own big one, and soothed his charge to sleep; then sat quite still and waited, a far-away look in his eyes.

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

When the warning roar of the next through train was heard, the policeman came to scold about the tardy nurse and to offer to see to the "kid," if that was David's train. But David Ransom shook his head and sat still. The train arrived and departed. Another half hour passed, then came the policeman with a severe-looking woman.

"Here's a nurse at last," he said. "They are not noted for speed up at that institution, I guess."

The nurse darted a wrathful glance at him and spoke sharply.

"We have one or two other things to do, besides attending to your deserted young ones," she said. "Give the child to me. Wasn't there so much as a bundle left with her? They aren't generally so heartless as that. Have you any idea when she was fed? I brought a bottle of milk with me, and I guess I would better warm some and feed her, so she will not deafen me with squalls on the way up. They are generally half starved."

Then David Ransom rose up, decision in his face and voice. "I'll ask you to take her, ma'am, and feed her as you said, and make her comfortable for a short journey, then I'll take her back again in time for our afternoon accommodation; I'm going to take her home with me."

The policeman stared, the loungee with

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

hands in his pockets laughed, and the severe-visaged woman said:—

“Adopted already, eh? I guess you are some relation to her, ain’t you?”

“Yes,” said David Ransom, firmly, “I am. I reckon she is one of the lambs that belong to my Master, and if I’m not mistaken, I’ve had orders to take her home and tend her for Him.”

Then the nurse stared.

“Is he crazy?” she whispered to the policeman, who shook his head.

“Not a bit. I know him, he lives back in the country on a farm; he’s as poor as poverty and soft as feathers.”

Mrs. Ransom did not know why she stood in her doorway looking wistfully down the road. She told herself that she had no call to expect David yet for hours; it stood to reason that he couldn’t get the afternoon accommodation, but it did seem so kind of lonesome in the house, thinking of him away off. So she stood and strained her eyes up the road. And her eyes were rewarded. Trudging steadily along from the corner where he left the mail wagon came David with a bundle in his arms. His gratified wife watched him eagerly; she wondered that he hadn’t more bundles.

“He carries it curiously, somehow,” she said. “’Most as if it was eggs, and he was afraid he’d break ’em.”

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

He was near enough now for speech, and she hailed him. "Did you get it, father?"

"Ay," said David, "I did; and it's ticking away this minute close to my heart. My eyes! don't it keep steady time!"

XII.

A HOME-COMING.

MR. BEN RANSOM hunted in his pocket for some stray coppers, and called the newsboy back; he had been gone from home so long that it might be well to buy a local paper and get the news, though it never had anything in it, so far as he had seen. The train was nearing the town where he claimed his residence, although he knew little or nothing about the place, save that it was a fairly convenient railroad centre. During the year and a half that he had been supposed to live there he had been absent most of the time, with the exception of hurried overnight stops, and an occasional Sunday.

His last trip had extended over a period of nearly five months, during which time he had held very meagre communication with his family. He was not fond of letter-writing, and considered himself too busy to indulge in it, and Lucy was a poor correspondent. He was, however, somewhat dismayed, in counting back, to discover that it must be nearly three months

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

since he had written. His excuse had been that he had expected almost every week, of late, to get started homeward, and it had not seemed worth while to bother to write.

It should be explained that Mr. Ransom, after drifting from one occupation to another, had finally become a commercial traveller; a business that suited his roving disposition fairly well, making it possible for him to get away from the slight restraints which his home would naturally impose, and at the same time keep up appearances.

Still, callous as his conscience was, the more he thought about this latest trip, with its long delays and silences, the more ashamed he felt. Even the long-suffering Lucy might have exhausted her patience by this time, especially as he had not even sent her any money. He moved restlessly in his seat, and told himself that his expenses had been confoundedly high, somehow, and it wasn't possible anyway for a man to support a family on his present salary; he should tell the firm so. Lucy had probably managed, chiefly by running in debt, of course; and he frowned over the thought that he had saved nothing with which to meet bills. Then he gave himself up to a few minutes of self-pity. It was certainly a miserable kind of a home-coming for a fellow who had been away hard at work for five months. Nothing to look forward to but a sickly, complaining wife, a

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

crying baby, and a horde of unpaid bills. He believed he had the worst luck of any fellow on the road; the fact was, ill luck had attended him all his life. He never ought to have—but there he stopped; he did not want to say in so many words that he never ought to have married Lucy.

He flung the local newspaper down in disgust; of course there were no news in it, the pokey old town never had any. He would make his headquarters in some other place as soon as he had money enough to move. This thought, however, made him wince a little; it recalled unpleasantly two other moves, when there had not been money enough to pay bills, and these bills were still following him disagreeably.

He leaned forward and helped himself to a newspaper that had been abandoned, sneering at the fact that it was twenty-four hours old, but he must get away from troublesome thoughts, so he proceeded to read an account of an accident and sudden death at the junction of the North Shore and Great Western roads.

A young woman—so the account ran—very plainly dressed in rusty black, had been seen making a dash for the North Shore train and narrowly escaping being run down by an engine that had switched. Then, just as she was mounting the platform of the car, she made a misstep and fell. A brakeman had been at

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

hand who helped her up and into the car. It was not supposed that the woman had injured herself, but soon after the train started the passengers noticed that she was breathing in a labored manner, and she told one of the women who went to her aid that she felt faint and was afraid she was going to have one of her hard spells. Her fellow-travellers had been very kind, fanning her, bathing her face, and bringing salts of ammonia for her to smell, but she sank into a state of semi-unconsciousness. An ambulance was telegraphed for, and the moment the train ran into the Westport station the woman was removed to it and taken with all speed to the Samaritan Hospital, but before they reached there she had ceased to breathe.

No clew to the young woman's whereabouts could be found. The North Shore and Great Western was of course an important junction, and she might have come in on any one of half a dozen trains that stop there during the morning. So far as had been discovered she had no baggage, and she carried nothing but a shabby little purse which contained a scrap of paper on which was written in a masculine hand, "My darling." The paper was worn with folding and bore marks of having been kept for some time. Aside from that scrap the pocket-book was empty. If the woman had had a ticket, she must have lost it. A handkerchief

found in the seat into which she had dropped might or might not have belonged to her. There were faint traces on it of a name that the official who examined it thought might possibly be "Lucy," though the "c" could be "e" or "a" and the "y" was too dim to be at all certain. Where the last name would have been was a torn place, so that the handkerchief, even if it belonged to the dead woman, was not of much help in establishing identity.

Other details followed with regard to the disposition of the body, and the steps that had been taken to learn if possible something about the stranger.

Mr. Ransom read every word with bated breath and the perspiration gathering in beads on his forehead. In vain he told himself in indignant protest not to be a fool; that "Lucy" was a common enough name, and what would Lucy Ransom be doing away out at the junction of the North Shore and Great Western? Besides, where was the baby? It was preposterous! Lucy would no more be anywhere without that baby than she would be without her head. Yet, as often as he thought of that pocket-book, empty save for the scrap of time-worn paper, he was back under that fatal elm tree in the Sterns garden with Lucy beside him, scissors in hand. He was holding the basket that she was filling with roses, and laughing at her for a "silly little girl," because

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

she had shown him a scrap of paper torn from the note he had written, containing the words, "My darling," and said that she meant to keep it among her treasures. How he had laughed at her, and assured her that he would write the words a hundred times for her, if she could thereby make treasures. Yet, in the poverty of her after life had she preserved this, to tell its pitiful tale in the shabby and otherwise empty pocket-book? How was he to get away from the haunting fear? He thrust the paper angrily into his overcoat pocket, wishing the man who had left it behind all sorts of ill things, but he could not thus hide away the thought it had suggested.

He swung himself from the train before it had fairly stopped at the station, and took long strides across town toward the small house in one of the suburbs, half of which he rented of the owner, who lived in the other half. He had never in his life been so eager to meet Lucy. The longing to be rid of his haunting fear and his gnawing conscience quickened his steps to almost a run.

At last he had the knob of the side door in his hand, but it would not turn, and his end of the house was dark. He gave a savage pull at the bell, and waited. Then he tramped around to the kitchen door, making intentionally much noise. If Lucy were asleep, he might thus be able to rouse her. But she wouldn't

be sleeping at this early hour! It was barely dark yet; she was much more likely to be out at some neighbor's. The kitchen door was locked also, but in his nervous haste he rattled it and called loudly.

A window on the other side was raised and a woman's head appeared.

"Is that you, Mr. Ransom? I thought I knew you, but I wasn't sure. Are you alone? Why, I want to know! Mrs. Ransom ain't at home; she's been gone 'most a week; she said she was going to meet you. You don't say you've missed each other, after all? That's too bad! She'll be awfully disappointed. But I've got a key here that will unlock your door; wait a minute and I'll bring you down a lamp; the gas is turned off your side. They've got a fashion of doing that now till the bill is paid. It's a mean way, I think; but that's the way it is. Your wife said she didn't care, gas was so high that she'd sooner burn kerosene than not. It is awful high now; they've gone up on it again — and poor, too, worse than ever."

She was down at the door by this time, a glimmering lamp in her hand. Mr. Ransom seized the key she held out and struggled with the reluctant key-hole while the voluble voice went on.

"This is kind of a cold welcome home, ain't it, after being gone so long? Mrs. Ransom will be dreadful disappointed, poor thing, to

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

think that she missed you, after all. I s'pose she's with relatives somewhere ; she said something about it when I asked her which way she was going. I kind of hated to have her go off alone so ; she ain't much used to travel, is she ? Thinks I to myself, if she was my daughter I couldn't bear to have her start off like that, and she so poorly, and with a baby to look after. She ain't strong, your wife ain't, Mr. Ransom ; and she's been dreadful lonesome, or something, a good deal of the time. I've known her to set and cry for an hour, steady, when the baby was asleep. I kind of thought something troubled her, but I don't know ; maybe it was just lonesomeness. Some nights she would get it into her head that you were coming for sure, and she'd hang around the door and listen for the train and watch for every one that passed ; and when it was too late and she'd have to give it up for that night, she'd lock her door and then she'd set down by the open window and cry as though her heart would break. I used to feel that sorry for her sometimes that it seemed as though I should fly ; and I says to my daughter Calista, 'If ever I get a chance, I'm going to tell him that it's too hard on that young thing to leave her alone so much, and she with a baby to think about and do for.' Of course, I don't know as you can help it, your business being such that it takes you away from home all the time ; but

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

if she could have some kind of a relation with her, part of the time anyway, it wouldn't be so bad."

They were in the plain little sitting room now. Lucy's rocker occupied the centre of the floor, and held a baby's half-worn shoe. The sight of it renewed Mrs. Jackson's speech.

"If there ain't that child's shoe! she must have kicked it off just before she started; she's a little witch about her shoes; the cunning little thing! I'd like to see her this minute. It'll worry her mother, though; I'm sorry she kicked it off. I says to her that very morning before they went away — I knew she was going, and I run in with a cup of coffee and a bite of something hot for her, and I says, 'Missy needs a new pair of shoes, don't she?' I don't see but she gets through them 'most as fast as if she could walk.'

"I just happened to say it, noticing the baby's shoes, but I was sorry I did, for it made her mother look worried, and she says:—

"‘These will have to do, Mrs. Jackson. I can't buy any new ones now.'

"You've got an economical wife, Mr. Ransom, I'll say that for her. I think I'm pretty good at savin' myself, I have to be, but she can beat me; and it ain't usual for young women."

If Mr. Ransom heard the half that was said to him, he made no sign beyond a muttered acknowledgment when he was directly appealed

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

to. He had taken the lamp from Mrs. Jackson's hand and was peering eagerly about the bare room in search of something that would give him a clew to the mystery. He forced himself to ask a question the absurdity of which did not appeal to him until afterwards.

"Did you tell me that she took the baby away with her?"

Mrs. Jackson stared.

"Why, of course," she said. "You don't suppose a mother would go away for over night, and leave the baby behind, do you? She ain't that kind of a mother by a long sight. I never see one more bound up in her baby. It's an awfully cute young one, Mr. Ransom. She's improved so much since you saw her, I don't believe you'd hardly know her. It seems kind of too bad for a father to have to be away from his own baby all the while, don't it? But there! we can't have things in this world jest as we'd like 'em; I'm sure there's nobody who knows that better than I do.

"I don't s'pose you'll find anything to eat." This, when Mr. Ransom, still carrying out his policy of hunting for something, opened the door of the little corner closet and peered in. "You see, she's been gone 'most a week, and of course she couldn't leave such things. Our supper's been over these two hours, but I might get you a bite and a cup of tea; that would be better than nothing. I'll do it in a

minute, Mr. Ransom, if you say so. I've got a fire in my settin'-room grate, and I can hang the teakettle right on there, and it'll boil in no time."

At that moment Mr. Ransom's eyes caught sight of a sealed letter addressed to him, and pushed into the face of the little mantel clock which it was his habit to wind whenever he was at home. The clock had stopped, but the letter was waiting for him. His one desire now was to be rid of Mrs. Jackson, and he spoke eagerly.

"Oh, no, thank you; I lunched late, and the last thing I want is something to eat. I am chiefly in need of rest. I travelled all last night, and have had a very tiresome day."

"Well, then," said Mrs. Jackson, "I may as well go, if there isn't anything I can do for you. You'll have a good long night to sleep, and no baby to bother you. You come over in the morning and have some breakfast with Calista and me; we have to have it before seven o'clock, so Calista can get to the store."

He closed the door on her, and was alone with his letter. His hand was trembling so that he could hardly hold it, though he called himself a fool, and asked himself fiercely what he expected. Since Lucy had seen fit to set out on a fool's errand in search of him, without even an address to guide her, he ought to be thankful that she had at least had sense



ERNEST POSEY — 1905

The length of the letter amazed him.

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

enough to leave him something to guide him in his search for her.

At last he was seated near enough to the glimmering lamp to read the never too easy writing. The length of the letter amazed him; Lucy had seemed always to dread writing.

XIII.

"I HAVE LET IT GO."

DEAR BEN: I hope you won't come back to read this; I mean I hope when you come I shall be with you, and then you won't ever read it, for I'll snatch it and burn it up; I'd rather talk. I could tell you all about it easier, I guess, but I've got to write it for fear after all that I might miss you, and you get home first.

O Ben I just can't stand this eny more! I know you'll laugh at me and call me full of notions but I am sick, I am, Ben, truely, I don't immagin it. I have got a pane in my side that stays now most all the time, and when I go up stares I loose my breth and feel like I was going to faint; sometimes I'm affraid I'll drop baby! I most did, once, and I was so scared I just panted for breth, and that scared baby and she cryed awful. I keep thinking what if I should get so I couldn't take care of her, or if I should die some of these times when I cant get my breth, what *would* become of her! And theres annother thing Ben I cant work at the macchine eny more; it makes my hart

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

beet so, you cant think! and we havnt got much of ennything left to eat; at the corner grocery they say we must pay up before theyll sell us eny more, and at Joneses they look so hatefull at me that I cant bare to go there. That Jones boy sneers and gigles when I tell him you will be home soon and tend to the bill. Mrs. Jackson is reel kind; she sais I dont eat enough, that I wouldnt be so week if I eat nurishing things, but I cant eat, and if I could I couldnt get the things; but I dont mind that, only for baby; but then baby wont mind now, if I dont eat, for Im weening her; I had to, because I was getting so week, and then theres annother reson; I dont know what youll say but I have set here alone and thought and *thought* till I shall go crazy if I dont do something. Ben, its more than three months since Ive herd a word from you and Ive been out of munny for six weeks! and I cant stand it enny longer. Im going to cary baby to Dave! I am, Ben, Ive made up my mind to it. I know he's good and so is she. I found a lot of letters that they wrote to you a good while ago, and I cryed over them they was so kind and good.

Ben I *cant have* this baby die like the others did, I just *cant*. She's so sweet and cuning noboddy could help loveing her, and she's real strong, to, and I keep thinking that I'll die in some of my spels that I dont make up, Ben,

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

honest I dont, and I dont immagin them, they are reel enough—and if I should leave her all alone, and me dead! Dont you see it most makes me crazy? Sometimes Mrs. Jackson dont come in for a day or to and she might cry herself to deth, and I cant bare it. I've got all readdy and tomorow morning Im going. Ive studded out the way and I know where you change cars at the North Shore Junction and Ive got enough of Miss Hannah's present to buy me a ticket; she told me to keep it till I needed it for something particular, and I always have, though I never told you; and I know there will never be ennything more particular to me than this is. It aint as though this was a sudden thing, Ben; Ive thought about it a good while, ever since I begun to have them bad spels that you laffed at; but I never was sure just when Id do it till now. And there's annother thing, Im going to take the watch along for Dave. I cant bare to leave it here alone and I know you always ment to send it to him when you got arround to it. Im going to put the cord arround baby's neck and sew a little pocket into her petacoat and pin it into it. Then Dave will have his father's watch, and it wont seem so kind of lonesome for baby. Dont you know I told you it was the verry first thing she took notice of? It makes me feel beter about leaving her to think it will be whare she can look at it. But I aint

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

going to let enyboddy know who I am, or who she is. He wont know its his father's watch, because it is just exzactly like dozzens of them in the watchmakers windows. Ive taken particular notice; so he cant tell it, and he wont think of such a thing of course. Ive planed it all out, becaus I think you wouldnt like to have Dave know, not till you get readdy to tell him; so I'm going to mannage some way to get baby into his arms and then slip away. Sometimes it seems as though I didnt care what became of me so that I got baby safe into his arms, I know theyll be such kind good arms. But I aint being wild and foolish for all that. Just as soon as I get baby safe I shall go and hunt for you; and Im making believe that Im sure of finding you and that we'll come home together. Then I think maybe you will take me to see Dave and his wife, and get baby, and maybe you will mannage so that I can go and live near to them; I could mannage with just one room, and then if anything should hapen while you was away baby would be took care of. You dont know Ben what it is for a mother to think that maybe she will have to leave her baby all of a sudden and noboddy to see to her. I cant bare that any longer, I know I cant. Oh dear! I dont want to cry, I want to finnish this leter, though I hope you wont ever read it. I cant make it sound like I want to, I never could, with writing. But if eny-

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

thing should hapen, before I see you, I want to tell you something. It's something that I tryed to tell you before, and a good menny times Ive planed out just what to say but I didnt ever seem to have a good chance. I want you to know, Ben, that I love you beter than anything else that there could be in all this world, beter even than baby, and I always have, and always shal, no mater what hapens. But I know now that you oughtent to have married me; we boath made a mistake. I aint anyways good enough for you and I had ought to have known it. I know you've had to be asshamed of me lots of times, you couldnt help it; I never had chances like you did, and Im awful sorry for you. But for all that we are married and we cant help it, now; and dont you think we ought to live together as much as we can for baby's sake? If I hadent have thought so I'd have gone away a good while ago for your sake; but Miss Hannah talked to me very solemn about mariage, and I believe it; she was a good woman, Miss Hannah was. Im not running away, Ben, don't you beleeve that for a minit; if I dont find you, Ill come back here and wait, and when you come if you dont like taking me to Dave's, why you can rite and ask them to keep baby till I get a little bit stronger so I wont feel affraid of dying and leaving her all alone. And then theres another thing — Oh dear! one of my spels is

coming on and I cant finnish and there wont be eny time in the morning. I cant get my breth — oh Ben, maybe — ”

Then came a blank ; the long letter was unfinished and unsigned ; but to the man who read it with a stricture at his heart such as in all his careless life he had never felt before, it needed no signature. The entire letter had been a revelation to him of his meaner self. He was not a bad man in the strictest sense of that word ; he was simply a careless self-loving man, who had married a wife by what he chose to call an accident, and who, since his babies came, had not lived at home long enough even to help bury the two who were gone, or to grow attached to the one who was left. But he had not realized that Lucy cared very much about that. Nor had he in the least understood how the long lonely days had preyed upon her ; he had not meant to be cruel ; and he indulged even at that moment in a passing spasm of self-pity. Why need Lucy have been the kind of woman who must sit at home and cry, instead of going out and making acquaintances and having a good time with her friends ? He would have found no fault with such doings ; there was no jealousy about him. It had all been a mistake from beginning to end ; if that confounded Hannah Sterns had not meddled ! But he had not meant to be so long without writing, and he had not realized that she needed things which she

could not get. Nor had she, for that matter. Wasn't it just like a silly woman to go without nourishing food and hoard up that piece of gold to waste in the wildest freak that ever was imagined? She must have been out of her mind, for she certainly had a good deal of common sense about most things. Perhaps she was really ill, and not full of imaginings as he had supposed. It was true that he had laughed at her symptoms, had even made a pun about them, assuring her that whenever he received a letter from her he had no difficulty in believing that she had "bad spells!"

But he must not sit glooming here. What was to be done first in order to find her? A woman, too ill, by her own account, to care for her baby, had undertaken a long, hard journey with no one to look after either her or the child! How did she expect to find Dave, when she had never even seen him and knew only in the vaguest way where he lived? He had not known before that she had even so much knowledge. But she had mentioned the North Shore Junction. With that name came the feeling again that his head was bursting; for all the while this man knew that he had been forcing into the background that newspaper account of an accident, and a death, and a handkerchief that might have the name "Lucy" on it, and a shabby pocket-book with a scrap of paper that said, "My darling."

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

But it persisted in coming to the front; he drew out the paper and read again every detail of the story. Then he found his time-table and studied trains and looked at his watch, a gold one with a pretentious chain. At length his mind took in the lateness of the hour and he started up hurriedly; or tried to hurry, though he stumbled and groped like a man suddenly awakened from sleep.

Once more he opened the door of the little corner closet and saw only bareness and neatness; Lucy was a neat, even a dainty housekeeper, and everything was in order. He felt faint, but there was no time to go out in search of food. He stumbled upstairs and opened a drawer or two in search of handkerchiefs. The bed was made, and the little crib, dressed in white and with a delicately frilled pillow slip, was empty and silent like everything else in the house. Mr. Ransom stood and stared at the little bed with a strange choking sensation at his throat. Just then he felt that he would give everything he had in the world for a sight of a brown head bobbing about on its pillow. He turned from it and made a dash down the stairs, set down the lamp, turning the wick low, drew the shade of the window near which it was, and groped his way to the door, leaving Mrs. Jackson's key where he had placed it, in the lock outside, and took long strides in the direction of the station. He must make connection

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

with the morning train for the North Shore Junction.

On the second morning thereafter he was pacing the platform of the Great Western station, presumably waiting for a train. As he tramped rapidly back and forth to keep the chill of the early morning out of his blood he told himself that of course he was going to take the West-bound accommodation which would be along in five minutes, and which would land him in two hours' time within reach of the old home, and give him opportunity to read for a certainty the other chapter of his life tragedy. The day before had been a terrible one to him. Arriving at Westport he had gone directly to the Samaritan Hospital and taken the necessary steps to enable him to get a view of that dead stranger's face; and had known, even before the covering was removed from the face, that he was looking upon all that was left of Lucy. He knew as he stood there that he had been sure of it all the time.

He had lived through the trying details that followed, managing everything in an eminently respectable manner. He had not chosen to claim the stranger as his wife, simply, he told himself, because he did not care to feed the curiosity of the gaping crowd. It was sufficient that he knew her, that she was an estimable woman who was known to have heart trouble, and who ought never to have been allowed to

travel alone. The remains he would take charge of, and attend to their interment, and as soon after reaching headquarters as he could bring it to pass, whatever expenses had been incurred in her behalf should be settled.

He was waiting now for the official details necessary before the body could be removed by train, the afternoon express being the earliest train that could be planned for. This would give him three hours at Dave's, provided he took the West-bound train which would be due in a few minutes. He had told himself when he came to the station that of course he was going out to Dave's. How else could he be sure about the child? As he paced the station platform he told himself how terrible it was that he should have to go back home under such circumstances! There would be very little time, too, for explanations; even without that lifeless trust to call him at once to the city, he should have to go as soon as possible to report to his firm. Besides, what was he to say about many things? Of course the child was with them, he had not for a moment thought to the contrary; Lucy would never have been boarding a train, southward, and alone, if she had not left the child in the only arms that she was willing to trust.

He acknowledged the trust as well placed. Without doubt Dave and Margaret would care for the little one, until such time as he could

receive her. Possibly it would be better for all parties concerned if he should not go to them just now. Hadn't he borne enough? They would certainly be able to understand his shrinking from any further scenes! He could write and tell them all about Lucy's strange hallucination as made plain in her letter to him. Without doubt she had been ill, in a fever, probably, with one fixed idea,—the desire to get the baby safe into Dave's arms. He would tell them how fully he understood why her delirium should take that form; they could see from it how much and how tenderly he had talked about them both. Being the man he was, the fact that he had never spoken a dozen connected words to Lucy about either of them did not even occur to him; what other solution of her conduct was there? He would ask Dave to write what particulars he could about the sad affair, and beg him and Margaret to care for the child a little while; of course he would repay them for any outlay they might have to make, and as soon as possible he would try to gather up the fragments of his broken home and make some kind of arrangement so that he could at least be near his little one. It struck him that that way of putting the case was very appropriate, and he realized once more that it would be far easier to write it than talk it. Still — and at that moment the accommodation for the West gave its warning whistle and thun-

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

dered up to the station. He had been walking, and was some distance from it. He turned at once, and retraced his steps, but he did not hasten; he was still considering. While he considered, and just as he told himself he had decided that it would be better to go, the bell rang out its warning and the train sped away.

"I have let it go, after all!" Mr. Ransom said regretfully.

XIV.

MISS HANNAH'S CHAMPION.

MISS Hannah Sterns sat beside her open window looking out upon the glowing beauty of field and hill. The trees near and far were dressed in the brilliant robes of crimson and gold, which they wore in that climate toward the closing of the year, but the air was that of a belated summer day, and Miss Hannah had stretched every casement wide, a dreary realization upon her, the while, of swift coming days when, for long months, doors and windows must be closed against cold and wind and sleet. The older Miss Hannah grew, the less she liked those rugged winters in which she had been reared; but it was chiefly on account of dreariness. That word was one which she rarely used, but it was often in her thoughts.

Voices from under her open window floated up to her; Harlan's voice and that of his special friend, Bert Crozier, who, on general principles, Miss Hannah felt that she did not like. He was speaking very plainly, and, before the woman at the window realized it, she was listening to the talk.

"Why aren't you going? Why don't you ever go to circuses, and shows, and things, like the rest of the boys?"

Harlan's laugh was easy and his words prompt.

"For good and sufficient reasons, old fellow, I can tell you."

"Well, but— What are some of the reasons? You aren't a baby, Harlan; why should you be tied up at home, evenings, and all the rest of the time? You don't ever go anywhere, do you, except to church three times on Sundays?"

"Occasionally I go to school, as you may have noticed," said Harlan, dryly.

"Oh, 'school,' of course. She couldn't be so mean as to keep you from that. But, honestly, Harlan, don't you think it is hard on you? You never go skating or coasting with us fellows, and you don't even belong to our club, though every fellow of us thinks you are the one to lead us. I've made up my mind to speak out for once, and tell you we think it is awfully mean in her to keep you so close."

Miss Hannah had heard a few times in her experience the tone that Harlan used next.

"I'd thank you, Bert Crozier, not to make quite so free use of that word 'mean' when you are talking about my Aunt Hannah; I find that 'hard on me,' at least."

"Well, of course, I don't mean anything

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

disagreeable, but — Say, that reminds me of something else that I want to know about. Hal Collins says she isn't your aunt any more than she is his; that you aren't a speck of relation to her, and have a right to do as you please for all her. Is there any truth in that?"

"About as much as Hal Collins usually puts into his talk. He knows that his mother is the real aunt, and I suppose he knows, too, that when I was left an orphan with no one to look after me, it happened to be the woman who 'isn't a speck of relation' who came to the rescue. If she hasn't earned the name of 'aunt' and the right to all the ideas that go with it, I should like to know who has! You can tell Hal Collins, if you feel like it, that it happens to please me to do as my Aunt Hannah wishes, and that she is worth all the real aunts there are among his list of acquaintances, and that a fellow who is worth his salt respects her if he hasn't sense enough to do anything else."

The listener at the window, who had felt the indignant red creep into her cheeks, now felt her eyes suddenly dim. What a grand boy that was! Bert Crozier seemed to echo her thought.

"You're a first-rate good fellow, Harlan, I'll say that for you. And I'm with you, too, so far as gratitude and all that kind of thing goes. I know something about it, myself; my re-

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

spected uncle, who isn't my uncle at all, has done all he could for me and keeps doing it, and I try to live up to his ideas pretty well; but I don't think I would like to have him interfere with me in the way you are interfered with. Don't you think now, upon honor, that you give in to her notions a great deal more than is necessary, or sensible? I don't mean to be disagreeable, but I've made up my mind to make a clean breast of it for once; I haven't been here long, and perhaps I ought to hold my tongue, but you and I are good friends, and I'm bound to tell you that the boys think you are a muff for standing it. There! it's out. I expected you would look black at me, but I can't help it. Why, old fellow, you are just a prisoner, that's what you are. Take last night as an instance. What was there to hinder your coming out to Will Potter's spread in his father's new barn? All the fellows were there, and most of them wanted you. And when Hal Collins mimicked your voice and manner and everything, and said: 'I'm sorry I can't be there, boys, but my aunt needs me at home this evening,' they just roared! and I wanted to knock half a dozen of them down.

"I admire your sense of gratitude and all that, Harlan, and I think about important things you are in the right, but I'm going to say plain out that I don't believe a fellow is called upon to make a fool of himself all the

while, to please an old woman who doesn't know anything about boys, or men either, for that matter. And if you keep on doing it, you can't blame the fellows for running you. They think you are a baby tied to your aunt's apron strings, and a slave under petticoat rule, and they'll say so; and I don't think you can keep your standing here in the school and go on with it."

The "old woman" at the upper casement fairly held her breath for the reply, and heard it, every word.

"Oh, you don't? Well, see here, Bert Crozier, let's you and me understand each other. I like you first rate, as I guess I've told you before, and you may talk just as plainly to me as you please, but when it comes to talking about my Aunt Hannah, let me tell you this. She may not know very much about boys—and you and I are acquainted with some that she could live and be happy without ever knowing—but she knows one boy, Harlan Kingsbury by name, and if he knows himself, and he thinks he does, he is not going back on her the least bit in the world, even if he never slides down a hill, or joins a club, or goes to a spread in a barn, or loses any other chances of equal importance. And all the boys who want to call him names for taking such a stand may do so just as long as they enjoy it. If I can't keep my standing in this school and

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

keep my self-respect at the same time, my standing may go to the dogs. And if you want to be my friend and find any mean scamps who occupy their time in making fun of my aunt, if you will get me a chance to punch their heads for them, I shall like it as well as anything you can do."

The woman at the upper casement sneezed violently, and let down the sash with a thud. Then she searched for her handkerchief, which was needed for her eyes as well as nose.

What had she been doing? Actually listening to a conversation not intended for her ears! The Sterns conscience and the Sterns habit rose up to shame her; yet, despite it all, she was glad.

Her splendid boy! Had not his championship of her just then and there repaid her for all that she had ever done?

Yet he had wanted to attend that party in the barn, about which he now spoke so contemptuously, and had been indignant with her for withholding consent; boys were strange creatures! And mean creatures, some of them. So that was the way they talked about him? He was a "muff" was he? — whatever that meant — and a "slave under petticoat rule," "tied to his aunt's apron strings"! Fine gentlemanly fellows they were! worth knowing, no doubt! There was more strength of character in her boy's little finger than there was in all the rest of them put together.

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

Miss Hannah sat long at the window even after it was closed. She had reached another problem in her intricate life, and had, all unwittingly, that morning been getting light as to its solution.

Up to a few months previous she had held undisputed sway in her home, her slightest word being accepted as law by all her subjects. The boy, Harlan, who at four had been a rebel, and had voluntarily surrendered before tears and distress, at fourteen was to all appearance her loyal and willing slave. Ten years of actual experience had taught Miss Hannah some lessons, and surprised her not a little as to theories. Harlan, the boy of strong will and generous impulses, had so far been ruled by her, not as she had planned, but rather, as he decreed, by love. Apparently he had never forgotten those tears which had given him his first glimpse of Miss Hannah's heart. He had taken possession then and there, and never for a moment thereafter had he seemed to hesitate as to his place in her home. "I will never be naughty if it makes you cry and feel bad," might be said to have been the motto of his childhood. If there was a very real sense in which Miss Hannah could be said to have brought the boy up, there was also a sense in which he had done the same for her. Though beginning later in life than most, she had been nourished on caresses. Harlan, never free

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

with kisses or loving words for others, had lavished both on her. She had been trained to expect eager kisses and caresses each morning and evening, and as often during the long full days as she looked tired or worried, or when there had been a difference of any sort between them.

A dozen times in a single day the boy disturbed and bewildered her, but his remedy was always frank repentance accompanied by loving words and ways. How Miss Hannah's hungry soul was fed by these, and what that boy became to her, it is doubtful if even he ever fully understood. It is one of the sacrifices of maternal love that it is never perhaps fully appreciated by those on whom it is lavished. But Harlan Kingsbury, as he grew older, learned and understood a good deal. He knew, for instance, that those bound to him by the ties of kindred had not only held aloof from him in his orphaned helplessness, but had resented Miss Hannah's way of filling their places.

He knew that they had advised her from time to time of the importance of beginning early to train a boy who had his own way to make in the world; and that when he was ready for high school they had plainly intimated that it would seem wiser to them to have him set about earning his living in some way. His father had wasted a great deal of time at school which might better have been

spent in practical ways. Hovering about the halls, wishing that Mrs. Henry and Mrs. George Collins would go, that he might himself interview his Aunt Hannah, Harlan had overheard some things which had both enlightened and amused him.

"I hear that he has done fairly well in the public school," Mrs. Henry was saying, "which is, of course, a great gratification to us. Doesn't it seem, Miss Hannah, as though he probably had all the education he will need to fit him for his sphere in life?"

Harlan's face had grown red and his eyes fierce; then his muscles relaxed and he chuckled. Miss Hannah was speaking.

"The trouble is I haven't found out yet what his sphere in life is to be. Boys of fourteen are not always sure of themselves; though I will give Harlan credit for knowing pretty well what he wants to do next."

Just then, Harlan bethought himself, and whistled, and ran away.

"She's a match for them," he said, and laughed again.

But the talk went on.

"Doesn't he incline to any trade? It seems to me it is quite time. Mr. Collins always says it is so much better for a boy who has to look out for himself to learn a trade of some kind. He thinks it is foolish for such boys to try to be merchants, or bankers, or anything

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

of that sort, because boys with prospects of capital stand ready for all such openings. I am sure you have been wonderfully good to Harlan, and if he is growing into a self-respecting boy, of course he won't want to depend on charity a day longer than he can help.

"Mr. Collins says there is an excellent chance in the village just now for the right kind of a boy. Mr. Adams, the harness-maker, is looking for help. He is an excellent man and one who would do the fair thing by a boy. Mr. Collins says he doesn't know of a man with whom he would rather place a boy than with Mr. Adams. But I presume you know him? He has the large harness shop on Main Street, and always keeps two or three young fellows who are learning the trade; nice boys he looks out for, always. Mr. Collins thought that perhaps you might not know of the opening just at this time. Of course we feel a peculiar interest in Harlan, and cannot help looking out for him a little. And then, too, we really feel, almost painfully, our obligation to you."

It was a long speech for Mrs. Collins to make. She had not intended it to be so long, but had paused several times for Miss Hannah to reply. That lady, however, had looked steadily at her out of keen gray eyes and waited for her to continue.

She waited again, until the situation was becoming embarrassing; Mrs. Collins could think

of nothing more that it would sound well to say.

At last Miss Sterns spoke.

"Oh, yes, I know Mr. Adams quite well; he is a worthy man. If you are thinking of having your boy learn the harness trade, I shouldn't suppose you could do better than with him. As for Harlan, he may or may not become a harness-maker. When the time comes for him to choose, if he considers that the work for which he is best fitted, I shall be the last one to hinder him. I believe in honest labor of all kinds.

"But just at present, Harlan is planning for high school, and though I haven't heard much about it yet, I dare say that after high school he will plan for college, as his father did before him. That covers a number of years, you see, and I don't suppose Mr. Adams will care to wait for him; though of course I'm obliged to Mr. Collins for his interest.

"But about the obligations to me of which you speak, you have forgotten the compact. You remember that before I assumed any obligation whatever connected with Harlan Kingsbury, I went to those who would be supposed to have the first right, and talked this whole matter over very plainly. I got the word of you two women, and of Mrs. Mitchell as well, that you gave up, for all time, all claim or responsibility or interest in the boy, other than

the claims which humanity enforces with regard to any boy. So you see, you have nothing whatever to worry about, and need not feel anything, so far as I am concerned.

"At the same time, if you know of any one who has a right to be especially interested in this boy, I don't mind telling you that his name, for all practical purposes, is Harlan Kingsbury *Sterns*, and his prospects are inextricably mixed with those of Hannah Sterns, herself, and you may say so from me if you want to."

"She's adopted him!" exclaimed the sisters as soon as they were out of Miss Hannah's hearing.

"And she will leave him all her money! A boy who is no sort of kin to her, or hers; and here she is surrounded by as fine young fellows as ever lived whom she has known all her life! Isn't it a shame! I declare, I believe there was truth in that old story about her having lost her heart to the father when he was young. What else could make her so foolish over Harlan Kingsbury's son?"

XV.

UNREST.

BUT though Miss Hannah had effectually silenced Harlan's relatives and gone her triumphant way with her boy, she had by no means trod on roses all the time. That problem to which reference has been made had been haunting her for months. Harlan had entered high school at the appointed time, and had promptly distinguished himself there as a good scholar, and a good fellow generally. But with high-school life had come an element of unrest which had puzzled and troubled Miss Hannah. Up to that date her charge had been undeniably happy. He had early shown an extravagant fondness for life on the farm, being afraid of nothing, and making friends with all the brute creation. He had seemed to care little for companionship with other boys. Liking all his schoolmates well enough, he yet parted from them gleefully at the great farm gates, and raced over Miss Hannah's extensive acres, desiring no other companion than Bruce, the big watch-

dog, supremely happy over being alive and free.

All this was after Miss Hannah's own heart. She went out at a given hour every day to walk among her flowers or in her vegetable garden, certain of being joined, presently, by an eager-faced boy who would walk beside her, plying her with endless questions, broken in upon by gay races far ahead, and returns with some new discovery in nature to wonder over. Every bird and bug and blossom was his friend; and every queer-shaped stone was a curiosity.

Wonderful hours were those to Miss Hannah. She might have grown sterner to the rest of the world, but the strong heart within her had blossomed and glowed under the spell of a boyish love. Harlan continued to love her openly and heartily. As he grew older he did not seem to notice that she was almost shamefaced, at times, over his kisses, but lavished them upon her in the same free way that the little boy in dresses had. Who but he would have thought of such a thing as kissing Miss Hannah?

The faithful Miranda, who was no less loyal to him than to her mistress, looked on well pleased at all the "doings," as she called them, between those two who were her world. Still, the two women had by no means spoiled the boy. That unquestioning obedience which

had been Miss Hannah's ambition had been almost if not quite attained to. He seemed never to think of disobeying. It had not occurred to Miss Hannah to wonder whether this was in part because there had been no temptation to do so. Up to a certain point her views and his ran parallel. She wished him always to know his lessons; he wished to be, and easily was, the best scholar in his class. She wanted him to be free and fearless with regard to animal life, and he meant to have every dog and cow and horse of his acquaintance for personal friends.

She wanted him to know how to climb and jump, and no squirrel could be more agile in his movements or take more daring leaps than he. She wanted him to come home from school with the precision of the sun, and he was always so busy with schemes—a rabbit hutch he was building, a new kind of bridge over the creek he was contriving, a seat in the old apple tree he was making for Aunt Hannah to sit in, and a curious row of steps he was inventing for her to mount to it—that his eagerness to be promptly back from school exceeded her desire to have him come.

She wanted to hold him aloof from close companionship, and there was not a boy in school that he cared for enough to bring him home with him. Small reason for disobedience had Harlan Kingsbury found. Yet he was

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

strong-willed, and knew that Miss Hannah was, and had early learned that the comfortable way for him, when he could not bend her will to his, was to yield to her gracefully. In all small matters he had been able to do this. However much he might like to loiter in the morning over his dressing, he soon found that he was expected to appear downstairs at a certain hour neatly dressed and ready for the day ; if he were not there, disagreeable results followed. Harlan did not like disagreeable things, and brought his reason to bear to help him avoid them. In this way Miss Hannah had succeeded in training him—or had he trained himself—to her views? Whichever had done it, the results were eminently satisfactory, and others beside Aunt Hannah and Miranda considered Harlan Kingsbury really a model boy.

It was with the ushering in of high-school life, or, at least, very soon afterwards, that the subtle change which Miss Sterns deplored had come upon him. Harlan no longer unquestioningly followed her directions, so absorbed in his own ideas as not to care what hers were, so long as they did not frustrate his plans. He followed directions still, but he bristled with questions. There were boys in the high school whom he liked ; why should he not, sometimes, at least, accept their invitations? There was, after a little, a club that the boys wanted him to join.

Of course he would not if Aunt Hannah did not wish it, but why should she not? What was the matter with clubs? Why did she not like Bert Crozier? He was a capital fellow. "About some things he thinks just as we do, Aunt Hannah." Why shouldn't he go home with Bert occasionally, and spend the night? or, better still, why shouldn't he ask Bert home with him for the night? Bert was lonesome; he lived where there were no boys, and had no mother and no Aunt Hannah. Why wouldn't it be nice to lend him a piece of her?

"You are big enough to divide," he would say, and kiss her daintily on the very tip of her determined chin, and laugh, and add:—

"Bert wouldn't dare do that, though; I shouldn't want him to, either."

But Miss Hannah's will had asserted itself stubbornly with regard to all these innovations. She did not like clubs, nor parties, nor evening visits, nor *boys*—if the truth be told. There was room in her heart for only one boy; he was sufficient for her world, and—poor Aunt Hannah—she wanted to be sufficient for his.

Harlan had not openly rebelled, though he had argued. And he had kissed her good night and good morning and good-bye as heretofore; but there had been fewer kisses and less fun in their bestowal, and occasionally he had looked very sober. And his questions—she felt at times that they would drive her to insanity.

"Why did she think things?" It was a strange humiliating revelation to her that sometimes she did not know! But she knew one thing, she was afraid of the world for her boy. If she could only take him and run away to a desert island, and keep him quite to herself until he became a man! See how the world treated boys! — motherless ones, who went early away from home. One name always stood out plainly before her when she thought these thoughts, but she never spoke it. Still, sometimes in this connection she assured herself that some day she would find Lucy and Benjamin Ransom — she always put Lucy's name first — and see if she could "do for" their children.

Her anxieties about Harlan had deepened within a few weeks. His sober moments seemed to her to come more frequently, and the shadow stayed longer on his face. Was he growing discontented? If he should break away from her and go wrong, could she bear it? Poor Miss Hannah!

Now, as a kind of dreary climax, the trusted Miranda seemed to have joined the enemy. But that morning, just before she shut herself into her room and opened the window in order to breathe, Miranda had discomposed her to a degree that she had not thought possible.

"If I was you," she had begun, just as Harlan had excused himself abruptly from the breakfast-table and left the room. There was a

somewhat questionable travelling show performing in the village, and Harlan had been telling what he had heard from the boys who went to it, and Miss Hannah had taken occasion to express herself in plain terms about shows in general, and that one in particular; and had gone on from that to other questionable things. Harlan had made no attempt to argue, or even to reply; but his face had gloomed over, and he had excused himself to go down in haste to Bert Crozier, who was waiting for him outside.

"If I was you, I wouldn't treat that boy as we have to treat Old Speckle when she won't stay at home and mind her business. *She* managed to get along pretty well with a string tied around her leg and the other end of it fastened to the chicken-house door; but a boy is different from a hen, especially some boys. I don't believe you can do it. For one thing, he is strong enough to break the string, when he gets ready, and skip; and Speckle wasn't."

"What do you think you are talking about, Miranda?" Miss Hannah's tone was as cold as marble, but her handmaiden did not mean to be put down by it.

"I can't help it, Miss Hannah. I don't meddle very often, and you know it; but I do hate to stan' around and see you kick over the dish you've been brewing these ten years." Miranda's similes were sometimes more striking than elegant.

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

Miss Hannah felt her heart within her tremble. Did Miranda then believe that the boy was so restless under her control as to be in danger of breaking away? She kept her tone steady.

"I wish you would speak plainly, Miranda, if you have anything that you want to say to me."

"Gracious! I'm speaking as plain as my tongue knows how. I say you can't tie a colt to the barn door and expect him to go ahead and get there all the same. And that seems to be what you are trying to do with Harlan. If that ain't plain, I should like to know what is."

"It is very far from being plain to me. What do you expect me to do? Am I to understand that you approve of this show, which even our neighbor Mrs. Stevens is trying to keep her son from visiting, and think I ought to encourage Harlan to go to it?"

"No, you needn't understand any such thing, and I guess you know it. More than that, I don't believe Harlan had any kind of a notion of going to that show, or wanting to. He didn't say he had, and he told me only yesterday that the pictures they used to advertise it were enough to keep any respectable fellow away. Them were his very words. But you pitched into him as though he meant to go every single night, and told him what you thought of that, and a lot of other things

not a bit like it, and made him feel as though he had done something to be ashamed of just by speaking of it. It isn't any low-lived *shows* that I'm talking about; it's *everything*. You know how it is, Miss Hannah. If I speak out real plain and tell you that you don't want that boy to go anywhere, only to church and to market, with you, you'll know it's the living truth. And it's against reason that a boy shouldn't want to do, once in a while, as other boys do. What harm could there have been in his going to that barn party the other night? If boys would rather have a party in a barn than in a house, I don't see why they shouldn't. I'm sure the noise they generally make fits a barn better than it does a house. As near as I can make out, he was the only one in the neighborhood who wasn't there, and every boy of them knows it was because you wouldn't let him go; and if boys are anything like what they were when my brother John Timothy was a youngster, you may be sure they won't let him hear the last of it in one while; and it's against reason and nature that he should like such goings on. And there's that Club—I don't know what a club is, to be sure, not that kind, anyhow; but it stands to reason that there can't be anything very bad about it so long as a number of good careful fathers and mothers, who have already brought up boys to be proud of, let their youngsters join it. I shouldn't

want to condemn it, anyhow, till I had found out something about it that was worth condemning. Harlan is a good boy, and you treat him, about such things, as though he was a bad one that had to be everlastingly kept in sight. My old father used to say that was a first-rate way to make boys bad; and he knew a good deal about 'em; he ought to, having brought up six of his own besides two that he took; and they all lived to do him credit, too, if they are my brothers. I've seen lots of boys, and I never saw one in my life that would bear more trusting and got less of it than Harlan Kingsbury. There! I've said my say, and if you don't like it, you don't, and I can't help it. Do you want me to make apple tarts for supper, or what?"

It was from such a talk that Miss Hannah had gone to her room and shut her door and opened her window very wide. She felt that she needed a great deal of fresh air. She was in a turmoil of indignation; not the less so because she had, with her accustomed self-control, restrained much outward manifestation of it, and answered Miranda with dignity, to the effect that of course she had a right to speak her mind if she wished; she had never been asked to go muzzled. But she must remember that she, Hannah Sterns, had also a mind of her own, and was the one who had assumed the sole responsibility of bringing up

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

a boy; it stood to reason, therefore, that she would be likely to bring him up in accordance with her own views. If other people did not like her ways, they had a perfect right to say so, of course, if that did them any good, and she had an equal right to do as she pleased, which she should.

Then she had given calm directions about the apple tarts for supper, and shut the door quietly and gone to her own room and opened the window. Her blood boiled within her. The idea that even Miranda must criticise her doings! That woman had lived with her too long; she had forgotten which was mistress. To presume to dictate to her was unbearable; and to say such things as she had of her management was insulting; she must get rid of Miranda and find some younger woman who would know her place. As for continual evenings out, whether in barns or houses, and Clubs of boys engaged in carrying out no one knew what kind of mischief, she would have none of them; and the sooner Harlan Kingsbury understood it, the better it would be for both of them. If he chose to break away and go to the bad in spite of her, he would have himself to thank, and not her. She had been able to do her duty before now when the road was hard, and she must hope for grace to continue.

It was just then that the sound of a boyish

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

voice which she loved better than anything left to her in the world floated up from below, and she heard herself championed royally. If you understand Miss Hannah's character, you know what an instant revolution this worked in her feelings. Had Harlan weakened, or complained, or planned rebellion, she would have set her firm lips into even firmer lines, and believed herself as proved by that very rebellion to be right, and gone on her uncompromising way, though it cost her not only Miranda, but the boy himself.

But Harlan had made no complaint; instead, he had burst into splendid defence of herself, despite the fact of his being called a "muff."

So that was the way they talked about him! He was supposed to yield to her wishes because he was a weakling and a coward, and not because he loved and honored her; and even Miranda thought that she did not trust him. She would show them all!

She sat long at that window, hands inert, which was unusual for her, but exceedingly active as to brain.

When at last she rose up, her step was alert, her face unclouded, and a look of decision and energy reached to her very finger-tips.

XVI.

NEW LIGHT.

IT was while they were enjoying those apple tarts that Miss Hannah astonished her audience.

“Who belong to the club that you talk so much about, and what do they pretend to do?”

Harlan's eyes expressed his surprise; this was the first time Miss Hannah had tolerated the club long enough to be told any details concerning it; but his reply was prompt.

“There are eleven boys; they wanted me to make the round dozen. Why, they are learning how to debate, for one thing. They choose a subject, and at one meeting they make speeches on it, and the next time they write papers; and they criticise one another. Professor Jayne told them how to plan it, and he helps them when they need it. He said it was a good thing. You know, Aunt Hannah, that there is a big prize offered in the senior year for the best debater, and our class intends to study up and get ready to do it credit. The boys say no class has ever thought of such a thing as working systematically in this way.

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

A four years' drill, you see, ought to make a big difference."

"A prize!" said Miss Hannah, with a sniff of contempt. "A thing that only one boy can get, no matter how hard the others try; and then all the rest can be choked with envy over his good luck; it's nothing but luck, anyway."

Harlan laughed. "The Committee of Award thinks it's their wisdom," he said. "But boys don't feel that way nowadays, Aunt Hannah. It is an honor to the class, whoever wins it, and we are all interested. The other half of the class, made up of the fellows who live at the North end, have organized in the same way. They are in luck, for Professor Bannard lives up that way, you know, and he lets them have his big carriage-house to meet in. It is a fine thing, Aunt Hannah; it helps the boys in their work; all the teachers think so. Mr. TenEyck says he wonders that other classes before this haven't been smart enough to get up some such plan."

"Mr. TenEyck thinks that what he doesn't know isn't worth knowing," said Aunt Hannah, brusquely, unable to resist this little thrust at a man whom she did not admire.

Harlan laughed again. "I guess he does think a good deal of his own opinion," he said, "but he is a smart man, all the same; so perhaps he has a right to feel so."

Miss Hannah, however, was resolved upon

having the last word. "The smartest ones don't go about poking their smartness at you all the while; they know they've got enough for people to find it out by themselves. Where does the club meet?"

"That's the worst of it, Aunt Hannah. We can't help feeling jealous of the other half with their carriage-house; when it comes their turn to meet with us, we haven't a decent place to put them; our boys just meet around anywhere it happens. Bert Crozier was going on about it this morning; he says if his uncle were here, he believes he would have a lean-to or something put up somewhere for us."

"You say 'we' and 'us,'" said Aunt Hannah. "I thought you didn't belong to the club?"

Harlan's face flushed. "I don't, of course," he said. "But the boys know I am interested in everything they do, and they come to me to talk it over. I can help them with advice, sometimes, if I can't in any other way. Bert came over this morning to see me about places for meeting. Week before last they had the Tolman kitchen, but Mrs. Tolman won't let them come there again, because she says they tracked in mud. It was an awfully rainy evening, but Bert says the boys took special pains, and used the door-mat all up trying to get their feet clean. He says if they could raise a dollar a time, they could have Mr. Patter-

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

son's old harness shop, but he won't let them in for less, and they think they can't spare a dollar every two weeks. Bert says the only place in this town that has been offered heartily is Bill Potter's back room; he said they were welcome to meet there as often as they pleased, and they needn't pay for anything but the lights. But some of the boys won't go there; they say their fathers and mothers don't like it."

"I should think not!" burst forth Aunt Hannah. "Bill Potter's back room, indeed! Of course he would offer it free. Trust Bill Potter for knowing what he is about!"

But Harlan felt that justice ought to be done even Bill Potter. "Bert Crozier says that Bill Potter is the only one who has offered them a single thing; that the other people, who have rooms that they could spare as well as not, act as though it was a gang of pickpockets instead of a literary club; and none of Bill's children are in it, of course."

"I should hope not!" said Aunt Hannah again. "Bill Potter is looking ahead; the back room of a saloon is exactly where he would like to bring up boys, and graduate them into the front room as fast as he could. We'll see if there aren't safer rooms than those for respectable boys. How would our parlor do?"

And now Harlan, too astonished to speak a word, set down the glass of milk that was half-way to his lips, and stared; and Miranda, who

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

was bringing in Miss Hannah's tea, stopped midway in the room and stared.

"The parlor!" gasped Harlan at last.

"That was what I said." Miss Hannah had the advantage of them; she was perfectly composed.

"What is the matter? You act as though you had never heard of the room before. I asked how it would do for your club meetings. It is large enough, certainly,—too large for any but boys to rampage around in; and it isn't wanted, just now at least, for any other purpose. I don't see any reason why you shouldn't have your club meet there every time; that is, if you are going to join the thing. Do you, Miranda?"

Miranda, thus appealed to, brought forward her teapot with a determined air.

"No reason in life," she said firmly. "Harlan couldn't wish for a better room than that; it's big, and has got a nice fireplace, and plenty of nice old-fashioned chairs; and then, there's the piano when they want to practise their singing. Bert Crozier was telling me this very morning that if they had a good place to meet, Mr. Wharton would give them singing lessons."

At last Harlan found his voice. "But Aunt Hannah—do you mean—you *can't* mean!—Are you willing to have me join it, after all? Have you really changed your mind? And you're going to let them meet here? Why, Aunt Hannah—"

There was a sudden rush; Har-

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

lan's chair tipped over ; he tripped on the rug and was in danger of quite upsetting Miranda, but he reached at last Aunt Hannah's side and had his arms about her, and was showering kisses on her hair, on her nose, on her chin, anywhere that a reckless rain of kisses could find landing.

"Pity's sake!" she said, emerging from the shower, red faced and hair dishevelled. "Don't kill me quite ; I've got something to do to make ready for your precious crowd. It's to-morrow evening, isn't it?"

Miranda wondered just how mistress and maid would meet when the boy was not present to absorb the attention. When she was asked what she thought about it, would it be better to express the astonishment she felt, or to act as though she had been expecting this all along. Miranda's one desire in the matter was to please Miss Hannah, but even she — after an experience of years, during which they had in some ways drawn close to each other — felt that she could not be sure just how to conduct herself in this emergency.

But Miss Hannah was equal to the situation. She asked for no expression of opinion as to her new departure. She came to the kitchen before the supper dishes were washed, but it was to astonish her handmaid still more.

"Is to-morrow a busy day with you, Miranda?"

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

"Not especially," said the maid, polishing a teacup until it shone, and wondering what was coming.

"Because if it isn't, I wish you would make up a batch of those tea-cakes that Harlan thinks so much of, with nuts in, you know, some of them, and some with raisins. I don't know how many tea-cakes a dozen boys can eat, but judging from Harlan they can be depended upon to get away with a good many. And if we haven't plenty of cocoa on hand, put it on to-morrow's list. This wind is sure to blow up a rain by to-morrow night, and I want to have plenty of tea-cakes and cocoa to offset the storm; they will be better for them than the cigars and beer that Bill Potter would soon have been offering them."

Miranda polished her teacups beautifully, and did not raise her eyes to Miss Hannah's face. Not for the world would she have reminded her of the times, without number, in which she had heard her inveigh against the habit of eating between meals.

"I always give my folks enough to eat at the table, and I don't see any reason why other people shouldn't do the same, instead of helping them to ruin their digestion by swallowing down things just for the fun of it, at all sorts of unreasonable hours."

Miranda knew that sentiment by heart, but she said, presently, in her most respectful tone:—

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

"I'll double the receipt then, shall I, so as to be sure to have enough?"

As the door closed after Miss Hannah, the maid addressed the teacups in genial tones:—

"Tea-cakes and cocoa in the parlor for a dozen boys! What are we coming to! She's got herself going, at last, and there's no telling where it will end. He's making her over, praise the Lord!"

Never were eleven more astonished boys than those which constituted "the club." The innovation was the subject of discussion in many homes on the day that the invitations were announced.

"Miss Hannah opening her house to a crowd of boys!" "The Sterns parlor thrown open to boys! Miss Hannah must have gone daft."

"I shouldn't like to be one of the boys," said Mrs. Henry Collins. "Miss Hannah will be on hand every minute, watching all they say and do; and she will read them more lectures than they have heard in all their lives before. That poor boy doesn't dare to wink unless she says he may. If I were a boy, I would rather be in the poorhouse than dependent on her."

"There is some catch about it, you may depend," said Mrs. George Collins. "Hannah Sterns isn't going to open her parlor at

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

this late day, especially to boys, without making them pay for it in some way."

So much were the invitations discussed, and so severe were some of the prophecies concerning them, that several of the boys grew cautious and were for declining, but the others held out sturdily.

"Of course we'll go!" said Bert Crozier. "What if she does stay in the room all the time, and keep us like mice in a trap, and read us a lecture a minute? I guess we can stand for one evening what Harlan has to bear every day of his life! He's a good fellow, every inch of him, and I say let's go, and do our best to make him think that we enjoyed every minute of it."

By which it will be seen that their invitation covered but the one evening.

"I didn't hint to them that they could ever come again," Harlan explained. "And so, Aunt Hannah, if they make too much noise, or you think you don't like it for any reason, you needn't have them any more. But if you do decide to do such a jolly thing as ask them to meet here every time, I want you to come in and do it yourself. Then they'll see what a splendid Aunt Hannah you are."

Miss Hannah smiled on him and kept her thoughts to herself. He wasn't going to tell her, not he, what an ogre the boys thought her. He wanted them to see for themselves that he

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

was not afraid of her. They called him a "muff," did they? and a "slave tied to petticoats"! She would show them.

She said not a word to Harlan about tea-cakes and cocoa.

"We may as well surprise him," she said to Miranda, who agreed, and was blissfully happy. She would have prepared roast turkey and all its accompaniments for a dozen boys, without a murmur, had her mistress so ordered.

The evening was all that Miss Hannah had prophesied. The rain fell all the afternoon in a steady downpour; other company than boys would not have been expected, but they came in a body. The large parlor had never looked more cheery. The evening was cold enough to justify a bright wood fire in the great fireplace, and Harlan had decorated the walls with treasures from the woods. Miranda had gathered lamps from all over the house, in addition to those in the handsome old-fashioned brackets, and as she lighted the last one and surveyed the effect, she said:—

"It's a nice bright room now; a body wouldn't have known that it could look so pleasant."

Miss Hannah said no word, but in her heart was a sense of relief in having the shadows chased from the old parlor.

"Isn't this jolly, though?" said Bert Crozier, as the boys cast admiring glances around the

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

room. "I guess the North end boys needn't try to crow over us any more after this evening; they never met in such a nice room in their lives."

The air of constraint that hung about them at first passed away when the boys found themselves left alone with Harlan, and they gave themselves up to the full enjoyment of the hour.

The debate was concluded and the critics were being merciless when the door opened and Miss Sterns entered the room. Every voice ceased on the instant. Harlan sprang to his feet, and the others, with the instincts of gentlemen, followed his example.

"Boys," said Harlan, advancing, "this is my Aunt Hannah, who asked you here this evening."

The boys bowed, in varying stages of awkwardness and embarrassment, and Miss Hannah made haste to speak.

"I'm glad to see you here; as Harlan's friends you are very welcome indeed. I have suggested to him that perhaps this would be a convenient place for your club—which I believe he intends to join—to meet all the time. I don't know what he has decided, but if he asks you, I hope you will come.

"Harlan, I neglected to ask which you would like to have served to-night, lemonade or cocoa. Miranda is waiting to know."

Never could there have been a more astonished boy than Harlan, but he did not disappoint his Aunt Hannah. With instant appreciation of her wish, he spoke quickly.

"Oh, cocoa, Aunt Hannah, by all means ; it is such a chilly dismal night outside that a hot drink just fits ; besides, anybody can have lemonade, but cocoa—don't you say so, boys ?"

There was a murmur of voices in assent and Miss Sterns, smiling, went away. She felt that the boys might have already discovered that Harlan was not quite a "slave."

XVII.

"MR. HARLAN."

THAT Miss Hannah's guests were fond of tea-cakes and cocoa they proved during the half hour that followed Miranda's entrance.

The boys spoke their minds freely.

"Isn't this luck, though!"

"Who would have thought such things could happen to *us*!"

"Those North end boys will be green with envy! Who cares for Professor Bannard's carriage-house now? And they never had refreshments in their lives!"

"Harlan, you sly old chap, why didn't you tell us what was coming, and let us get a speech ready?"

At last came one more honest than polite.

"I tell you what, Miss Sterns is a daisy! that's what she is. I'm never going to believe again a single thing that I hear about folks."

Until the words were spoken he had not realized their import; then he did and his face grew red. But Harlan laughed pleasantly, and met his regrets halfway.

"That's a pretty good resolution, Jimmie;

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

I guess we could all make it with credit to ourselves. I know there have been things said about my Aunt Hannah, plenty of them, that haven't a shadow of truth in them, and I dare say it is so about other people. Have another cake, Charlie, to go with your cocoa, and then some cocoa to go with your cake."

Harlan's face was radiant, and he was the prince of hosts. His Aunt Hannah had vindicated herself before all the boys in the jolliest of ways; he knew there would be plenty of tea-cakes; neither she nor Miranda ever did halfway things.

That the evening was not only a surprise but a complete success the guests did what they could to prove. When they had reached a respectful distance from the front door, they halted in the darkness and rain and gave three ringing cheers for "Miss Sterns," three for Harlan Kingsbury, and three for the "good luck" that had fallen to them as a club.

Harlan eagerly explained all the "yells" next morning.

"I heard them splitting their throats," said Aunt Hannah, dryly. Harlan should never know how she had sat up in bed to listen, and then hunted for her handkerchief and wiped her eyes.

How should a boy be expected to understand any connection between yells and tears?

"I am glad they did not yell in the house," she said. "I don't see but they behaved

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

themselves as well as could have been expected, and they are not a bad-looking set, as boys go. Who is that Bert Crozier, and what is he doing here? Hasn't he any folks of his own?"

"Not many, Aunt Hannah. The first thing that interested me in him was happening to hear that he had no father nor mother; but he hasn't an 'Aunt Hannah' either. He says the only relative he has living is an uncle who isn't his uncle at all!"

"And I suppose you think that is like you, too?" Was there the slightest perceptible tremor to Miss Sterns's voice? Did that have to do with Harlan's quick response?

"No, Aunt Hannah, because you see I've adopted you out and out and forever. An aunt is a great deal better than an uncle, anyhow."

"Was the Crozier boy adopted?"

"Well, no, not exactly. He is a kind of relation, or — no he isn't, either, but he was always called so. He is his mother's sister-in-law's brother. Can you make out that relationship?" The sentence closed with Harlan's genial laugh; but he continued his explanation.

"Bert says his mother and her sister-in-law were very dear friends, just like sisters, and when she died, the sister-in-law, it seemed to them all as though they had lost their best friend. This uncle — Prescott his name is, Uncle Prescott — was staying at their house at the time, and he

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

was just like an own brother to Bert's mother. Then, a little while afterwards, when Bert was about ten years old, his father and mother were both killed in a terrible railroad accident, and this Uncle Prescott came on at once and took charge of him, and of everything, and acted, Bert said, as though he were two uncles, instead of none; and he has taken care of Bert ever since. There weren't any real uncles, nor aunts, nor anything, but he has supplied their places, just as some other persons we could mention have done."

Miss Hannah was unaccountably interested in Bert Crozier.

"What is his uncle's business?" was her next question.

"Oh, he is a minister; a 'great big minister,' Bert says," and Harlan laughed. "He means he has a big church. He lives in Boston. Bert has been there at school, but last winter he wasn't well at all, and the doctor said he must get away from there; and his uncle, it seems, knew this part of the country when he was a young man, and liked it, and wanted Bert to come here; so he wrote to the Chapmans,—that is where Bert boards,—and they used to know his uncle, so they took him. They are very nice to him; Bert thinks it is on his uncle's account, but I guess they like him for himself,—everybody does."

Miss Sterns went back through the years.

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

The Chapmans were the young minister's, Ray Prescott's, intimate friends when he came to the village to supply the pulpit. In fact it was through the Chapmans that he came to the little church, though he brought a letter of introduction to her father. Miss Sterns used to have a calling acquaintance with the Chapmans, who were the aristocrats of the little town in which they lived, but she had long ago dropped all her old acquaintances and never made calls. It struck her as a strange coincidence that the boy whom her boy had chosen for his best friend, and whom she had disliked a little merely because he was a rival, should be Ray Prescott's boy. Their two lives were to have some links, it seemed. *Was* it Ray Prescott? He moved to Boston years ago; she had heard so much about him at the time.

"What is his uncle's first name?"

She had been silent for so long that Harlan had gone back to his own concerns, as he often had to do when Miss Hannah chose to relapse into a reverie.

"Whose uncle? Bert's? Why, it's Ray, I believe. Yes, it is, just Ray. I remember I asked Bert once if it was an abbreviation. Why, Aunt Hannah? Did you know him when he used to be here?"

"I have seen him," said Aunt Hannah. Then she gave the signal which meant that the breakfast hour was over.

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

Miranda felt that she had spoken truth when she told the teacups that there was "no telling where all this would end." Certain changes in Miss Hannah's methods became from that time very apparent. The truth was, that word "muff," so new to her in its use in modern slang, had taken a peculiar hold of her imagination. In connection with certain other words, also slang, it had revealed clearly to her the position in her household that the people had given to Harlan Kingsbury. They must be instructed. It had reminded her that the years were passing, and that the little boy in blue aprons was gone forever. In his place was a boy who seemed to be hourly growing tall and broad shouldered. He was growing old, too, of course. In a little while he would be a man. He ought to be getting ready for his manhood, and so ought she! That last thought came to her like a revelation. She was thinking about and talking to and planning for the little boy, and the little boy was already gone! Miss Hannah's heart experienced the pang which every true mother will understand over the thought that her boy was growing up! even though, like those true mothers, she would not have had it otherwise for the world.

Had Miranda noticed, even before she did, that the big boy had come? Miranda, with the rest, must be instructed. Harlan Kingsbury's position in her household must be dis-

tinctly defined, — to themselves first, and then to others.

With characteristic promptness she set about establishing new conditions. She made no revelations to Miranda; such was not her way. She did not even admit in words that there were to be any changes; she simply took them for granted. In place of the familiar, "I'll tell Harlan to go as soon as he comes home," she began to say: —

"I'll ask Harlan if he can spare the time to do that errand," or "Probably Harlan will be willing to see to that. I'll ask him."

"I will talk it over with Harlan," became a sentence often on her lips. At first it came with an effort; and then it was as though it had been suddenly revealed to Miss Hannah that she had a friend with whom she could confer, and who would have a right to be interested in all the details she chose to give him; after that, she revelled in the phrase.

The shrewd Miranda detected the change of tone the first time such phrases were used, and began at once to govern herself accordingly. It was not that Harlan's tastes and wishes were being deferred to, which marked the change; both women had been for years doing and making just the things that the boy liked best, but they had refrained from owning to each other that he was the motive power. Now, it was increasingly evident with each

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

passing day that Miss Hannah meant her world to understand that Harlan Kingsbury was a recognized force in her life.

Miranda was not to be outdone by her mistress. She studied the situation carefully and came out boldly one morning with her masterpiece.

"Miss Hannah, Mr. Harlan wants to know if he shall put the red apples in the large bin or the small one."

"*Mr. Harlan*" indeed!

There was a quiet smile on Miss Hannah's face as she washed her hands. Well, why not? Since Harlan wasn't a little boy any more, why was it not proper for a person in her employ to so address him? Had not her mother trained the good woman who was now Mrs. Austin to say "Miss Hannah"? She said nothing about the change to Miranda, either then, or afterward; and that faithful woman, if she had not been well acquainted with her employer, might have been left in doubt as to whether the improved speech had been even noticed, had not she overheard one day a sharp rebuke administered to little Susy Jenkins, who was helping her father pick windfall apples.

"You should say '*Mr. Harlan*,' Susy. Little girls who are well brought up do not call young men like Mr. Harlan simply by their first names."

Susy looked her unbounded amazement, and

Miranda retreated in haste in order not to be seen laughing.

Club life went forward merrily, after that evening of its introduction to the Sterns parlor. Harlan Kingsbury had been welcomed to its membership with every possible demonstration of delight, and had become, almost at once, the acknowledged leader.

Miss Hannah's invitation — or rather Harlan's invitation as she persisted in calling it — to make the Sterns house headquarters for the present was gratefully accepted; and every boy of them in return for such unparalleled kindness secretly resolved to redeem the reputation of boys for rudeness and carelessness.

Nor did Miss Hannah and Miranda retreat from their share in the entertainment. Now it was a kettle of "taffy," boiled at the kitchen fire and watched by the skilful Miranda until it reached just the right moment for cooling. Again it was nuts and apples, and then corn, popped by the boys themselves on the splendid bed of coals in the fireplace. Then it was doughnuts, or cookies, or seed cakes, or the ever popular tea-cakes. Scarcely a meeting of the club that winter but some dainty was offered in Harlan's name in the way of refreshment.

Very rarely did Miss Hannah herself appear, and then under protest. An unaccountable and unconquerable shyness of boys in general, which

she had always felt and never confessed, remained upon her in full force. When she had been compelled to deal with them, she had hid the shyness under a stern visage and a brusque — not to say harsh — tone, which had invariably deceived them, and given her the name of being hard. Perhaps it was in part the influence upon her of this name which had made Miss Sterns grow really hard in some directions, as the years passed.

But it would not have been wise to have hinted at that or any other charge against her in the presence of members of the club that shared her hospitality. Miss Hannah was “splendid!” was “jolly!” was “true blue!” was everything that in the parlance of boys meant genuine respect and admiration.

Nor was it simply her comfortable room and her cakes and taffy that influenced them. As the months passed, and she came, by various ways, sometimes by what we call accident, into closer touch with one and another of them, there was that between them which made them look upon Miss Hannah as a friend on whom they could rely for help, and one “whose advice a fellow would do well to follow.”

Still, as might have been expected, Harlan Kingsbury was really the one most affected by the subtle changes which went on about him, on and after that first meeting of the club, with himself as host. A less manly boy, or one who

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

had been less thoroughly trained, would doubtless have been injured by a sudden accession of dignity and importance. To be deferred to, and appealed to, to realize all at once that he seemed to be no longer one under authority, but had been placed in authority himself, this was to try what mettle the boy was made of.

There was a sense in which Miranda, for a time, looked on with more anxiety than anybody else. She knew more about boys than Miss Sterns did, and she had seen some of them "spoiled."

But Harlan Kingsbury did not "spoil." The sudden change in his life bewildered him for a little, but as he became accustomed to his atmosphere, there developed within him a tender chivalry for the woman whom he had all the time loved and respected. He knew as well as her older friends did that it was hard for her to defer, to trust, to ask, instead of command; to, in short, change the habits of a lifetime, and she had done and was doing all this for him! He began to feel, rather than understand, her reason for the change. It was so that he might take his place among the boys like other boys, with the same privileges and rights that they had. Dear Aunt Hannah! she should never be disappointed in him. He would be always and everywhere not only a good true boy and man, but he would be such a man as she wanted him to become. What if

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

she had some old-fashioned ideas that did not seem to him to be worth cultivating? They were nothing that would harm him, perhaps they might even be good for him. Who could be sure? Aunt Hannah was a shrewd, far-seeing woman,—everybody said that of her. Whether they are worth it or not, her notions should be respected. What he knew Aunt Hannah wanted he willed *should* be; and the *willing*, at least, was good for him.

The immediate result of this decision was apparent. Such of Miss Hannah's peculiar ideas as the *boy* Harlan was beginning to carry out reluctantly, hedging the way with troublesome questions and keen argument, the young man, that he seemed suddenly to have become, anticipated, himself proposed, followed out cheerfully, heartily, with all the time a gracious air of protective tenderness toward her that was new and beautiful. Miss Hannah's heart blossomed under the spell, but she made no sign.

As for Miranda, she made the dishes her confidants, as usual.

"I've seen lots of boys, and I thought I knew them through and through, but I never saw a boy before that in twenty-four hours' time got to be a man!"

XVIII.

"THE CHILD."

THE little four-roomed cottage on the wind-swept prairie had apparently taken root and grown. An ell had been added on the left side, so arranged, as to windows, that lovely views of the rising and setting sun could be had, and the large, many-windowed room thus afforded was as pretty a place as any reasonable young woman need desire.

An interesting study was that room of what limited means, refined taste, and excellent executive ability can accomplish.

The floor was of hard wood, and a young girl's hands had applied fresh coats of oil from year to year until now, to use David Ransom's simile, it was "shiny enough to do for a looking-glass."

Home-made rugs were plentiful; the colors so carefully chosen and the work so neatly done that the whole effect was artistic.

The furniture, from the low, wide couch which served as a bed, to the low chair in the east window, was almost entirely of home manu-

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

facture. Most of it was dressed in white, as were the windows. White muslin, not fine, not in the least expensive, ruffled and tucked and laundered and draped by a girl's skilful hands. But the walls she gleefully called her masterpiece. David Ransom himself had covered them, under his daughter's directions, with a rough gray paper perfectly plain, about the effect of which he was more than doubtful.

"Looks for all the world like the paper father's boots came back wrapped up in after they had been sent to be mended," was his demur. "You can't mean that kind, my girl?"

"Yes, father, that's the kind. Be sure to get enough to cover the walls within about two feet of the baseboard; and a plain green like this little piece to go below; that will make a dado, father, and you will see how lovely it will be."

"A dado," he said, shaking his head, with a serio-comic look on his face. "I've heard of didoes many a time; it was one of father's words, but they weren't made of paper. — Mother, do you know that this girl of ours is as full of notions as the meadow is of daisies this minute? Here we've been planning to get her the nicest kind of bright blue paper all covered with pink and yellow roses for her walls, and she won't have anything but some shoemaker's wrapping paper the color of the sky when it means to rain for a week. That's a kind of a 'dido,' ain't it?"

Mrs. Ransom laughed, — a genial, entirely satisfied laugh, and bestowed a fond look upon the girl as she said : —

“Never you mind, father, do as you’re told and it will all come out right. If the child wanted to paper the walls in black, we should have to let her do it ; you know we promised it should all be just as she said.”

“Oh, I’m agreed, I’m agreed,” he answered, supreme content in his voice as he carefully folded the samples of paper and placed them in his pocket-book. “She may put didoes all over it if she wants to ; father would have been sure to like her kind.”

“The wall will be lovely, mother, when the pictures are placed ; that paper will make just the right background for them ; and that green, father, is the color that the grass will be after the week’s rain that you are talking about is over and the sun is shining.”

David Ransom laughed again and shook his head. But there was a light in his faded blue eyes, as they followed the girl about, which said plainer than words that “mother” was right. Their little girl might paper the whole house in black if she chose, and they would know, after the first shock was over, that it was just exactly the thing.

Arrived in town, Mr. Ransom shut his eyes to the delights of the sky-blue paper with its trailing roses of pink and yellow, and brought

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

home the rough gray, and the even rougher green, and placed them on the walls under his daughter's tuition.

But it was not until her pictures were every one arranged to her mind, and her curtains hung and looped, and she had called father and mother in one evening, just at the sun-setting, to see the result, that he awoke to the possibilities of grays and greens. Then the artist soul within him almost laughed out for joy.

The pictures on the walls were very unpretentious, many of them being magazine prints that had come in the young girl's way and that she had cherished for this hour. Some of them had been cut from illustrated newspapers, and had looked common enough in their original surroundings; but, tastefully mounted and fastened to that background of soft gray, the effect was remarkable.

One entire side of the large room was set apart for pictures of the Christ. Mere common prints, many of them, a few more pretentious; but all of them telling their story faithfully. The child Jesus with his mother,—the girl had revelled in this scene and had fair copies of more than a half dozen famous Madonnas; Jesus in his early boyhood; his First View of Jerusalem; his Visit to the Temple; Jesus at the Well of Samaria; Jesus and the Fishermen; Jesus Blessing Little Children; Jesus in the Home

of Mary and Martha; Jesus and Nicodemus; The Walk to Emmaus; Gethsemane; The Risen Lord. What had not the artists' pencils drawn and the common arts of everyday toil reproduced in cheap form, in order that this beauty-loving, reverent girl could adorn her walls with the life-story of the Master?

David Ransom stood before those pictures at first in speechless, reverent delight.

"My eyes!" he said at last. "Who ever saw the like! — Mother, how did she do it? Where did she get them?"

"I've been saving them, father, until we had a suitable place for them. I began when I was a little bit of a girl. I read a scrap in the *Illustrated Christian Weekly* which that minister in the East used to send, you know, about a girl who saved up things and furnished her room. That gave me the idea, and I began on it at once. Don't you know you began telling me before I was six years old about the room I was to have some day? But my ideas enlarged as I grew older; it isn't simply 'my room' now; I have called it 'ours' for years. Our family sitting room, that is its name. Look around you, father; you don't half know its charms. See how nicely I have hidden every suggestion of a toilet. And here are the roses you wanted."

She was standing before a screen that was entirely home-made. David Ransom had him-

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

self made the frame, without an idea as to its possibilities. Common print and gray paper had done the rest, and then it had blossomed. Flowers and ferns and trailing vines, and birds and butterflies, all cut from numberless annuals and catalogues that had found their way through the years to David Ransom's little farm and been carefully treasured, were scattered in delightful profusion, and with a carelessness that was really studied grace, over the three-leaved screen.

"Beauty and utility joined forces here, you observe," said the girl, with her sweet, gay laugh. "Look on the other side."

She held back a leaf of the screen for them to enter. Behind it was a generous corner of the large room furnished as a toilet, with a home-made wash-stand upholstered in white, and a capacious shelf of drawers, also home-made, and surmounted by a tiny mirror whose ugly frame was hidden behind white drapery.

"It is all so very pretty in here," said the gleeful proprietor, "that I hate to hide it; but when we are entertaining company in the large room, of course it will never do to suggest that there is such a place as a dressing room.

"Look at those pockets, mother. Aren't they nice and deep? Those lower ones are for shoes and rubbers, and the upper ones for ribbons and things, you know; then there is a row of cute little ones for bottles. Now

that I know exactly how to do it, I am going to make you and father some pockets for your closet door; *very* deep ones, father, so your slippers can hide."

She was talking about the three-leaved screen, which was lined with pockets of every size and shape.

"A regular closet in itself!" the admiring mother said.

David Ransom tiptoed about the room with almost an awe on his pleased face. She had transformed it, that girl of his! It had been just boards and nails and glue before she touched it; now it lived! And she had done it all with such common, everyday material! Pictures framed in birch bark, with pine cones and acorn cups for the corners — things that he had kicked out of his path as he walked, and called them worthless! Patches of brilliant coloring on screen and curtain made of the autumn leaves that he was continually shuffling under foot! Behold, in her hands these common things had become beautiful!

It was more than beauty that impressed him.

"PEACE I LEAVE WITH YOU"

said the motto in letters made of something fluffy white, and strung on an invisible something so that they seemed to float in space just at the foot of the child's couch. They were so arranged that the early morning sun could

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

touch them, and when it did, something on the fluffy whiteness glinted as though pearls were hidden within. He knew, for he had seen them but that morning. He thought of the words anew as he looked about that white room. "Peace." Was not that the word for it? He had left His peace with their child! The thought made the old man's eyes grow suddenly dim with reverent, grateful tears.

He ordered them back to their unseen cells; the child must not see him pay the tribute of tears to her handiwork; she was too young to understand their meaning.

"It's wonderful, mother, just wonderful!" he said, sinking into the large, old-fashioned rocker, his father's chair; "the child," as they two loved to call her, had cushioned it luxuriously, and placed it in what she called "father's corner."

"How she could make it all, out of what she had to do with, beats me; it seems like witch work."

"The child has taste," said the quieter mother, with a smile that was for the girl alone, and that she understood and answered.

"Taste, and what my grandmother used to call 'gumption,' — I think she has a great deal of that."

The young girl laughed merrily.

"I wish I could find that word of yours in the dictionary, mother," she said. "It seems

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

to mean so many interesting things. I'm ever so glad that you both like our room; it was great fun to do my part of it. I think my library is the very nicest, though. Father, those shelves are perfect."

The "library" was a row of shelves built into a recess in the wall, and reaching from the floor midway to the ceiling. Here were collected the treasures of the family in the way of books. When one considered the circumstances of this family, the collection was large, and it was decidedly choice; choicer than even the girl knew, much as she loved her books. Her friends, who had remembered her from time to time with gifts, had certainly known how to select; and several of her teachers had known how to tell her what to buy. Moreover, David Ransom himself as well as "mother," though with few opportunities to cultivate their tastes, had not been close students of the Bible all their lives for naught. When either had the rare chance of selecting a book, it was sure to be one well worth owning.

The top shelf of the modest library the girl described as "given over to luxury." There was a little old-fashioned portrait of Mrs. Ransom as a girl, framed in birch bark and touched here and there with lovely gray-and-green lichens; there was a quaint silhouette likeness in black, of David Ransom, the nearest attempt at a picture of him that they had, also carefully

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

framed with acorn cups fastened to gray board. For the rest, there was a pretty shell or two, a delicate bit of dried moss clinging to a stone, several Christmas cards carefully mounted, and then the quaintest touch of all: an abandoned bird's-nest skilfully placed on a standard made of three small pieces of moss-covered bark and doing duty as a watch-case; for within the bird's-nest lay an old-fashioned silver watch.

David Ransom arose from his easy-chair presently and went over to look at the watch, which he was sure to do as often as he came into the child's room. And always on his face, and often on his lips, was the same thought, "It is the identical pattern of father's watch; as like it as two peas in a pod."

In the years gone by that same watch had been the source of more or less friction in the otherwise peaceful home, David Ransom and "the child" having come nearer to a disagreement over it than over anything else in their lives.

When the young girl first heard the story of David Ransom's watch, a gift from his father, that had gone astray, and heard of the interesting similarity between the two watches, hers and his, she had pleaded with him even to the verge of tears to take her watch and call it his.

"I can't wear it, you know, father, I can't *ever* wear it; it is too big for a girl, and it isn't the kind that girls use. But it keeps good

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

time, and you need a watch; why won't you take it from me? Don't you love your own little girl well enough to wear it for her sake?" Then the little girl had actually cried over it!

They hurt David Ransom—those tears; he would have been glad to keep tears forever from the child's lovely eyes.

He took her in his arms and kissed away the drops very tenderly, and it was then that he told her, in more minute detail than before, the story of her watch.

"Little daughter, listen to father. That day, you know, when the pale little mother who loved you very much put you into my arms and went away, besides your neat little clothes that she had made just as nice as she could, and put little ruffles on them, she left you something else. In your wee flannel petticoat was sewed a neat pocket of just the right size, and pinned into it was a big silver watch. As soon as mother found it and called me to look at it, I says to myself:—

"That's the father's watch! he has gone away to the other country, and left it for his little girl. And the poor pale mother when she saw she was getting sick and couldn't take care of her baby any more, and made up her mind to carry it with her and give it to the one that God picked out, sewed its father's watch into its little petticoat, so that the child would always have something of its very own father's

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

to keep.' Do you think I could take that watch away from your room, little child, when I know what my own father's watch would have been to me? I wouldn't do it for the world, little daughter, I couldn't."

"But, father," said the eager little girl, quick to see her advantage, "I needn't *give* it to you; I could just lend it, the way you did yours to Uncle Ben; and after a while, when you got yours back, you could give me mine."

David Ransom was still for so long after that that the child was afraid she had hurt his feelings.

XIX.

"SOME THINGS STAY SETTLED."

AT last David Ransom spoke, holding the child close to him the while.

"No, little daughter, I can't do that.

It was different with your uncle Ben.

He was a man, in size, when he went away, and he was going away from home and needed the watch. He meant to send it back to me, I always knew that, but he couldn't. That helps me to see how uncertain things are in this world, how we can't always do just as we would like to; and I couldn't run any risks with this watch of yours for your own father's sake. But I can have the use of it just the same, don't you see? Here it lies all the while in plain sight, and all I've got to do is to step in any time and take a look at its cheerful old face; you can't think how I shall enjoy it; and every time you look at it I want you to say to yourself: 'That is my dear own father's watch that my dear own mother saved for me, and it says to me all the time: "Keep watch little girl, keep watch, and live so as to honor your father and mother."' Won't that be a nice thing to do?"

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

With this compact the child was obliged to be content. In truth she had, before this, learned that both David and Margaret Ransom, though for all ordinary occasions her willing slaves, could be as firm as steel bands whenever they judged firmness to be necessary; and more than once her stout little will had been made to bend to theirs. She was twelve years old when she set her heart upon having her foster-father wear her watch, and learned that she must give it up.

She was a little past eighteen now, and the watch was still in its bird's-nest case keeping watch over her life. It had, years before this, ceased to be a guide so far as measuring time was concerned, but who shall say how much its silent face had to do with ordering her life?

David Ransom rarely left the child's room without a tender glance toward the old watch so like his own; and for the girl it was a daily reminder of the dead father and mother, whose memory she obediently tried to reverence, while thanking God every day with a glad heart for the new father and mother that He had given her.

It would be difficult to plan eighteen happier years than these that the baby had lived whom David Ransom carried home from the Junction on that memorable day.

"Mother," after her first shock of disap-

pointment over the fact that father had come home without his watch, accepted her trust, and thenceforward held the baby to her faithful heart as a God-given treasure. Both father and mother, as they daily bowed at what they could at last with swelling pride call their family altar, grew more and more triumphant in their gratitude, with the passing years, and did not hesitate to speak of the child as "the blessing that had crowned their lives."

A special guardian angel of rare skill must have been set apart to watch over the life unfolding on that little wind-swept farm. So strong she grew in body and mind; so sweet she was, and winsome, so charming in all her little ways; so good, at least so her mother and father always said, and there were none to deny it. With such wise training as a woman like Margaret Ransom knew how to give, aided and abetted by the husband who believed in her, and who was himself both wise and kind, with no unsafe companions to lead her astray, trained from babyhood to habits of reverence, obedience, and self-control, nourished constantly on tender love, and fairly hedged about with the atmosphere of daily prayer for guidance, it is small wonder that the child grew in all sweet strong ways, and was a daily joy and blessing in her home.

Other blessings also than those connected with her home life became strongly defined

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

as the years passed. It really came to seem that there was foundation for David Ransom's belief that the little one had brought with her a blessing, not only for the home, but the neighborhood. At least he liked to mark the time when the new branch railroad which brought them in direct communication with large markets as "the year our little one came." He entered in his note-book the first remarkable yield of a new variety of fruit as "the day our little one was two years old." It is true they had no means of knowing the actual date of the child's birth, but one of the first things they had done had been to settle upon as probable a date as they could, and thereafter it was carefully observed as her anniversary. The coincidences were curious, to say the least, which marked that anniversary as the date of some special gift of Providence.

With the new railroad, which made a station within a half-mile of David Ransom's house, came new people and new ideas. One important result was a new schoolhouse for the neighborhood; and in the course of years a really excellent school, to which in due season the child was sent.

It did not surprise either of her foster-parents that "she took to books as a duck does to water" — this was David Ransom's simile. They had already apparently forgotten whither the laws of heredity might lead them if pressed

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

in this case, and said, quite as if they believed it, that the child "took after" them.

"Mother," said David Ransom to the new school-teacher, "was a noted scholar in her day, and a teacher herself, as soon as she was old enough; and we think our little girl is going to be like her. As for me, I always wanted learning, though I never got it, and our little one has got the same identical notions that I had, and we mean she shall have it."

The new teacher smiled, a kindly appreciative smile. She had been in the neighborhood long enough to have a hearty admiration, as well as respect, for both David Ransom and his wife, and the little girl she loved. She stayed six years as the head teacher of the school, which grew into a large one, and she was a teacher born for her work, and did all that she could for her favorite pupil.

The minister, too, and the minister's wife grew to be almost extravagantly fond of David Ransom's little girl. They had her much with them. The wife taught her music, and the husband had her begin Latin with his children. Later, when a special class in drawing was formed, and later still, one in French, arrangements were speedily perfected for "that bright-eyed Ransom girl, the best scholar in high school," to join them.

It was a proud day for David Ransom and his wife when the girl was graduated from

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

high school, having won the medal for composition, and been awarded the prize in history and algebra.

"It's a good thing, mother, that our girl has graduated," David Ransom said, with proud voice and smiling eyes.

"Time to give the others a little chance for prizes, eh? They haven't had any showing, with her around."

In the honest farmer's heart, and very often on his lips, was the fixed determination that the high-school diploma should be only what he called a "stepping-stone."

"The child is going to be college-bred, somehow, pastor," he confided to the minister, two years before she was graduated from high school. "We don't see yet how it is to be done, mother and me don't, but it's to be *done*; so much is settled. You see, mother always wanted to go on and learn more; if her father had had his health, she would have had her chance; but he got hurt, and the thing had to be given up. And for me, I wanted schooling bad enough, and didn't get it; and the child has got to make up for both of us, don't you see? She is just as much set on it as ever we were, and that makes it easier, makes it kind of necessary, as you may say. If girls had been going to college as much when mother was young as they are now, why it would have been college that she wanted to go to; so it stands to reason that

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

that is what the child wants, and what she is going to have."

It certainly did "stand to reason" that the child should at least think much about the matter, for it was kept steadily before her, from the day of her first lesson in long division; not as a remote possibility, but as a matter of course.

"When our little girl goes to college," would David Ransom remark, sometimes as often as half a dozen times in a single day, when some circumstance occurred to hold his thoughts in that line, and then would follow plans connected with what was to be done during that important period.

"We shall miss her dreadfully, mother; sometimes I can't quite make out what we are going to do without her for so long."

This was a confession that he made, one morning after the talk had been of college life.

"H-s-s-s-h!" said "mother" with a warning glance toward the inner room. "Don't let the child hear you say that, for pity's sake! She has been thinking about that herself, and she's 'most got where she doesn't believe she can leave us alone for so long. If you let her know you feel it that way, too, she won't stir a step. There never was a child so ready to give up herself for the sake of other people."

David Ransom took the alarm at once, and

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

henceforth no hint of anything but delight connected with his thoughts of college life passed his lips.

And they planned on. They became very conversant with different colleges. The minister and his wife had extensive acquaintance with college people, and could furnish catalogues without number, besides adding valuable information with regard to certain ones. So also could several of the girl's teachers. From time to time came tourists to the town, en route to places of greater interest, or stopping off to visit friends. Two college girls came one summer to the minister's house and spent a month; and "the child" met them somewhere nearly every day. She adopted their college as hers, and it held its place for months. They had gay talks together about it, David Ransom and Margaret, and their daughter. Father and mother came to be quite as well acquainted with it as was the girl herself. David Ransom studied the illustrated catalogue and tried to select their daughter's room, and argued with "mother" over it. She wanted the south corner room on account of more sunshine, but he could not give up the view from the east window.

"I don't see but I shall have to take two rooms to please you," would the girl say, gayly. "But that will be very expensive, father."

"Yes, we must consider that," he would say,

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

shaking his head gravely, with all the air of one who must make immediate decision.

"Well, I don't know but you will have to give up the view, daughter; sunshine in a room is so important; it's really a question of health, you know."

"She can go out on the porch for the view," said Mrs. Ransom.

"So she can, mother, so she can; and it will be good for her to be out of doors often; you're right, as usual."

Their realism was so perfect that there were times when the girl forgot that she was playing, and felt almost ready for college.

With the opening of another year, the year after she had graduated from high school, came a new teacher to the school, of a different sort from any who had been there before; and there was immediate affinity between her and "that lovely Ransom girl."

The two became, almost at once, intimate friends; although David Ransom's daughter had not heretofore been quick to choose friends. But this young woman was an exception; both David Ransom and his wife recognized it.

"I should 'most have known that she was the daughter of a missionary," said Mrs. Ransom, "just by looking at her; she looks different, someway. Poor girl! so many thousand miles away from her father and mother; I don't know how they stand it."

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

"But they are coming home next year, mother," said David Ransom, cheerily. "And then she is going back with them, you know. This is a year of privilege for us, ain't it? To think that we are real intimate friends with a girl who is going to be a missionary! That's another blessing that has come to us through our daughter."

It was a rare privilege to know Esther Bushnell intimately. One result of the intimacy was an entire transfer of interest and affection to another college. Henceforth not only the person most interested, but her father and mother, knew that Miss Bushnell's college was the only one for them.

"It is a missionary college!" said David Ransom, with the awesome tone in his voice which he always used when that subject was before him, — "only look, mother, what a list of their old graduates are at work, not only in the home field, but the foreign! It's the place for our girl, Margaret; it's father and mother again, you see, working together; it beats all, don't it?"

The year sped, and Miss Bushnell went away; but not before the little farmhouse had been consecrated by an all-day visit from her missionary father and mother. And after that, next year, letters "all the way from India" came to the Ransom home with great regularity, addressed to "the child," but of equally absorb-

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

ing interest and honor to the father and mother.

And the college was definitely chosen at last. Henceforth there was no wavering, no considering of the merits of other institutions.

"Some things stay settled," said David Ransom, firmly, as he laid down with an air of indifference a much illustrated catalogue of a new university.

"Now that we know just where our girl is to go, I must say I don't feel any hankering even to look at other places. I seem to need all my time to get acquainted with that one."

But though the place was chosen, there was no indication that the time was any nearer than it had been for years. David Ransom had prospered, as he was fond of explaining to all the interested, since, to the best of his belief, his prosperity dated from the coming of his little girl.

But, to maintain his family in fairly comfortable circumstances in their little home, adding each year some much needed improvement or convenience, was one thing, and to maintain a daughter in a distant and expensive institution of learning was quite another.

Work as hard as he might, and save and contrive as carefully as he could, David Ransom was compelled to own, though quite to himself, that he did not yet "see" his way through; but his faith never wavered.

XX.

A "SIGN."

IT was the year that David Ransom's daughter was eighteen, and on a lovely morning in May, that she sought him for a confidential talk. She had just put the "white room," as her father loved to call it, into exquisite order, with a stem of daffodils under "mother's" picture, and a deep plate holding moss and wild flowers by the side of the bird's nest, and had come to lay a few of the sweet-smelling blooms in her mother's lap, as she said : —

"There is a piece of the day for you, mother. I'm going out to have a very important talk with father ; if I succeed in convincing him of his duty, I shall tell you about it while I'm getting dinner. Remember, mother, *I'm to get the dinner* ; you are not to lift your finger toward it."

"You are spoiling me," said Margaret Ransom, with a face that said she liked being spoiled. "You can stay out all the morning as well as not ; the spring air will be good for you, and the dinner is nothing for me to get."

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

"While for me it will be a great big thing that will exhaust all my energies! That is the plain inference, isn't it, vain little mother? Nevertheless, I shall get dinner."

"What do you want to convince your father of? It will be easy work, I'm sure. He would try very hard to believe that two and two made five, instead of four, if he thought you wanted him to."

The girl gave her mother a half-amused, half-thoughtful look, and shook her head.

"It is the other way, mother. He fancies that two and two can be made, somehow, to measure five, and I want to convince him that it is always four. But I don't find him easy to manage; on the contrary, I think he is as 'sot in his way' as any man of them, and they are all more or less 'sot'; it is only women like you and me who are always docile."

She flashed back an amused glance, as she left the room, at the quiet-faced mother with her purposeful mouth and determined chin, that stood for as resolute a will as ever hid under a calm exterior.

"And I take after my mother," she told herself, smiling, as she ran down the path toward the south meadow.

David Ransom was ploughing; turning up the soft, damp furrows with a steady, practised hand, and enjoying meanwhile to the full the beauty of the fair spring morning.

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

The vision of white that presently appeared in the landscape fitted in with his thoughts and brightened the smile on his face. The child was never long out of his mind and a sight of her was always able to call out a grateful smile.

It was a fancy of this peculiar father and mother that they liked to see their daughter always in white.

"It kind of belongs to her, somehow," said David Ransom. "I don't know how, either," with a puzzled look on his face; "every flower that blows belongs to her, too; she looks pretty dressed up in any of them, but the ground-work, so to speak, seems to me ought to be white."

This fancy they had indulged both winter and summer while the girl was little, despite the wondering disapproval of some of their neighbors, who accused Mrs. Ransom of "slaving herself to death to keep that girl rigged up in white!"

Their opinion did not disturb the quiet mother.

"It is no more trouble to wash and iron a white dress than it is a blue or pink one," she said cheerfully. "I don't know as it is as much; and she doesn't soil them a bit quicker, either."

As the girl grew older and learned to launder her own neat dresses, and then to choose and make them for herself, she shared, or else she

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

humored, the fancy of her father and mother for whiteness. Wool in winter, cotton in summer, — not always, not often indeed, fine, and rarely made in other than the simplest ways, but nearly always white. It was the plainest of white towelling that she wore that spring morning, "almost as easy to wash as a towel," she had told her mother, gleefully, and needing no ironing. Yet, with a knot of spring flowers at her throat and a great mass of them at her belt she looked ready for morning calls, instead of kitchen duty.

"Are you very busy, father? too busy to talk to me for a few minutes?"

"Well," said David Ransom, resting an arm on the plough and taking in complacently this addition to his view, "that will depend on circumstances. Was you wanting to get some ploughing done this morning, ma'am?"

The girl laughed genially.

"Not to-day; it is weeding I think that I want done just now. Come and sit on this nice log in the sunshine, daddy, and rest for a few minutes while I talk to you."

Mr. Ransom was an industrious man and the ploughing needed to be done; but the sweetest sound on earth to him was his daughter's voice; and she was a very considerate daughter; it could not be an unimportant matter that brought her out to interrupt his work in the morning hour. He guided his team to



"Now, daddy dear, I'm going to be real serious."

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

a sheltered resting-place, and went obediently over to the log in the sunshine.

The girl nestled close to him and took one great toil-hardened hand in her two small ones, patting it lovingly while she talked.

"Now, daddy dear, I'm going to be real serious, and I want to talk a long time without your saying a word. You are to listen, sir, to my arguments, and not interrupt me in the middle of them. Do you understand?"

"This sounds pretty solemn," said David Ransom, with a serious voice and a twinkle in his eyes. "Either I've done something so bad that she won't even let me put in an 'I'm sorry,' or else she has such a bad cause to present that she is afraid to have it argued as she goes along, but wants me to wait until I've forgotten the weak places. I wonder which it is."

The girl laughed again, and kissed him lavishly.

"He's a good daddy always, and he knows it; and my cause is good; you listen to the end, and you will see. I mean it, father dear; I want to be real serious.

"I want you to know how beautiful I think it is in you and mother to have been all this long while planning great things for me. There never was another such father and mother as mine, and no girl could be happier, in thinking it all over, than I am. And now I want you both to do something else for me. I haven't

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

said a word to mother, yet, because I know I can coax her over to our side, when she finds that you are there. Father, I want you to let me give up college and get to work, helping to earn our living. No, daddy dear, you are not to interrupt, remember; I do truly want this, and I want it very much, because it is right. I have just as good an education this minute as a great many people live happily with, all their lives, and I know I can.

"Yesterday I discovered that the Williams district school is to be vacant next fall; Miss Elmer has given notice that she can't take it for another year—she is going to be married. Now, daddy, you are to reflect that the Williams district schoolhouse is hardly two miles from our home. I feel almost sure, don't you, that I could have the school for the asking? In nice weather I should like nothing better than to walk to it night and morning, and in weather that wasn't nice, you know you would like to take me. You see I have it all planned, and everything is going to be lovely. No, no, daddy! I'm not nearly through. I've left the best argument for the last. You must know, dear, that I can't be happy and have it any other way. You hear, daddy, your little girl can't be happy unless you let her do as she wants to, this time. She loves you, oh, very *very* much for wanting her to go to college, but she has made up her mind that she doesn't

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

want to go. And she does want to help earn money, and take care of mother, and do all sorts of nice things for father, and not be separated from them for three or four great long years. She is sure that she can't do that. Now, you will be a dear good father, won't you, just as you have always been, and listen to your little girl? And I won't grow into an ignorant woman, either; I will promise you that. We can buy ever so many more books with the money that we shall save from college expenses, and I will study every day, and at the end of four years I shall know almost as much as though I had spent them away off by myself hundreds of miles from you. It is a lovely plan, father, and all arranged. Say you like it, quick, dear; or I shall think you are tired of your little girl and want her to go away from you."

He did not take it as she had thought he would. Although he had made one or two efforts to interrupt her, now that he had opportunity, he did not seem in a hurry to speak. Instead, he was so silent, and so long silent, that she would have been afraid he was sorely hurt but for the quiet look on his face and the tender caress of the hand that rested on her shoulder.

At last he spoke.

"Little daughter, it is father's turn now, and I'm going to tell you a story.

"There was once a little bit of a boy who

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

wanted to go to school and learn a great deal. He wanted to learn to be a minister. When he was a wee speck of a fellow he used to pray about it, and ask God to help him grow into a minister. He got so that he loved to pray, for he knew, after a while, that God heard him and talked to him, and helped him in a great many ways. But about that one thing He said to him: 'No, little boy, your duty doesn't lie along that road; you must quit school even now and help your father.' He made it real plain, so that there wasn't any question about that being the right thing to do. The boy thought that maybe the time would come when he could quit work and go back to school, but it never did. It was just as plain that his duty was to work as it is that most children of his age must go to school. He was always glad that the way was made so plain. He had a little brother, the smartest little fellow that ever was, a good many years younger than he was, and he began to think, after a while, that maybe the little brother was to be the minister, and he was to help get him ready. But the little brother never had any such notion. He didn't care for such things, not even to pray!" At this point, David Ransom drew a long sigh, and was still for several seconds.

Then he began again.

"By that time the boy was a man grown; too old to get learning even if there had been chances,

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

and there wasn't any chances. But by and by he took up a brand new idea. He had a friend, a beautiful young woman, who had wanted all her life to get more schooling than she had — though she had a good deal — but she wanted to be a missionary ; and her way had been hedged up, a good deal as his was. By and by, those two people got married, and it was along of that that their new idea came. They agreed that if Providence ever gave them a little boy, he should have an education if they could anyways manage it, and if he wanted to be a minister, he should have a chance to get ready for that ; and they prayed about it a great deal, and was happy in it. But Providence never gave them any little boy. All the time, they both said that if Providence should give them a little girl, she should have her chance too, same as the boy ; she might want to be a missionary, you know, like her mother ; and whether she did or not, she should have her schooling. But Providence didn't give them any little girl — not in years and years. And then, one day, He sent them the dearest little baby girl, with big brown eyes and the sweetest smile they ever saw in their lives. And now my girlie knows that I'm talking about her and her mother and me, doesn't she?"

There were tears in the girl's eyes, but her face was bright as she looked up and nodded,

and kissed and caressed the brown hand that was still in her white ones.

"That is a day that I can never forget," said David Ransom, with a kind of sweet solemnity. "The way you took hold of my big thumb with your mite of a hand, and held on, is something to remember forever. We began right away, mother and me did, to pray about your chances. We wanted you to have the ones we had lost, and your own, too; and we told heavenly Father that if He would prosper us in our work we would take it as a sign that He meant you to have your chance. And He took us at our word and begun right away. It is a curious thing how the path opened for us. It wasn't plain very far ahead, ever; we had to carry a lantern, so to speak, all the while, to see just where to step next, but we saw the step, every time. The first year you were old enough to need it, there come along the first real good school we had in this neighborhood since mother used to teach it. And the year you had a chance to take music was the very first year we could have give it to you, and it's been like that all along.

"Now I've got around to this college business, and that has been as queer as any of the rest. When we see that you took to schooling with all your might, and was just as eager for chances as we were to give them, why it made our part real plain. We got to feeling sure

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

that the college would come along in its place. Your mother said the lantern wasn't big enough to shine ahead for us to see it before it was needed, but that needn't make any matter. I had told her my notion about a lantern, you see, and she kind of took to it. Still, there was days when I'll own that I seemed to lose my courage and feel kind of low and disappointed. I never did have quite so restful a faith about things as your mother's got. I'm something like a child, I guess, that needs a good deal of petting and coaxing up. One night I said it out plain to heavenly Father. Says I, 'I believe in the college, Father, at least I think you mean it that way, but I'm a weak creature, needing crutches a good deal of the time. If you would just give me a little sign, seems as though it would help. I know the Pharisees was forever bothering you, asking for signs, and I wouldn't be like them for the world; if it ain't right I'll get along without it, but if I *could* sell the brindle cow to-morrow for the price that I think she ought to bring, it seems to me that I could take it for a sign, and feel better.'

"Maybe that kind of praying sounds irreverent to you, daughter. It did to me, afterwards; I got to thinking about it, and felt real ashamed that I was such a weak disciple that I couldn't trust Him without having *signs*, but still, I knew I didn't mean it for irreverence, though it was what might be called an unreason-

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

able prayer; for I knew that I couldn't go to town the next day to even try to sell the brindle cow; and I didn't know a soul that wanted a cow, anyway. Now, if I could tell you just how I felt that next morning when it happened, maybe you would understand better, but I ain't good at explaining things."

As he spoke, the old man withdrew his arm from the girl's shoulder, and sat erect and grave, yet with a strange, glad light on his face and a ring in his tones that thrilled to the listener's soul.

"That very next morning before ten o'clock a man that I had never heard of in my life came out here and bought the brindle cow and paid exactly nine dollars more for her than I had planned she ought to bring! I was that astonished that at first I couldn't say a word. But after a minute I told him that he was offering nine dollars more than I had meant to ask, and maybe I oughtn't to take it. And he laughed, and said it was rather a queer way to do business on both sides, perhaps, but he had been paying that price for cows not so good as mine, and he guessed we would let it stand; and he counted out the money.

"Daughter, mother and I went on our knees together that morning and thanked heavenly Father for being patient with a faithless, weak disciple like me, and giving me the very sign I had asked for; and I promised Him then

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

and there that I would never go back on it again, but would do my level best, and then just wait for Him to light up the road that you was to travel on, to college. And from that day to this I haven't had a doubting minute about it; and mother never had. Do you think, my girl, that father will give it all up now?"

The girl's face was sweet to see; it was very bright, although there were tears on her cheeks. She kissed him once, reverently, on his forehead, and spoke softly:—

"No, daddy, you are to have it your way."

Mrs. Ransom looked out into the kitchen as the dishes began to clatter.

"Is that you, daughter? I can do that work as well as not if you will let me. Did you manage father, too?"

The girl came into the living-room with that light on her face which was sweet to see, and kissed her mother.

"No," she said, "I didn't manage him. Mother, I am to go to college."

Mrs. Ransom smiled quietly.

"Of course you are, child," she said. "Your father and I knew that a long time ago."

XXI.

“FITTING THINGS TOGETHER.”

IT was nearly three weeks after David Ransom and his daughter had their confidential talk, that the experience came for which the talk had helped them to be ready.

David Ransom had driven to town in the early morning, and brought back the mail. He came into the kitchen with an open letter in his hand, and to his daughter's question: —

“Anything for me, father?” answered eagerly.

“Ay, my girl, there is; there's this letter, and I reckon it is all for you. Come and sit down, mother, and hear the biggest piece of news we have had for many a day. Who do you think the letter is from? I knew the writing the minute I laid eyes on it, though I haven't seen it for — I don't know how many years.”

“Let me see if I know it,” said Mrs. Ransom, drying her hands while she glanced over her husband's shoulder. “Why, it's from —”

“Yes, 'tis!” said her husband, in delight. “It is from our old pastor, sure enough. You missed knowing him, my girl, and when you

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

hear this letter you will know that you missed a good deal."

"I can't think of his name," said Mrs. Ransom, and her husband supplied it promptly.

"Prescott, Ray Prescott — don't you remember you said his mother must have named him after the sunshine?"

He dropped into the first chair he saw, and began reading, in the eager excited tone in which he had conveyed all the information:—

"MY DEAR OLD FRIEND AND BROTHER, DAVID RANSOM: Although you have been often in my thoughts during these many years, I have never before carried out my intention of writing to you. I have now, however, heard such an interesting piece of news concerning you, and it fits so beautifully into an opportunity of mine, that I must hasten to bring the two together.

"Yesterday I met, quite by accident as some would say, providentially as you and I believe, some old acquaintances of mine, the Channings of Albany, and in the course of our comparing notes as to Western travel and experience, it developed that they had met Mrs. Ransom and yourself, and had been guests in your home. They gave me a delightful bit of news, even that you had a charming daughter in your home, and that, so fast fly the years, she is ready for college. Think of it! I did not know, before, that I was getting to be an old man.

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

"Now for my other bit, to fit into this. Three days ago there came to me the pleasant opportunity of offering a scholarship in my own college — than which there is none better on this round earth — to whomsoever I might elect for that honor; and who is there in all the world that I would like better to introduce there than the daughter of my old friends of sweet and tender memory, Mr. and Mrs. Ransom?"

David Ransom paused to note the effect of his news, and also to wipe his eyes; and his audience exclaimed.

"The Channings!" said Mrs. Ransom; "those are the girls who visited at Professor Burrman's, and we had them and the minister and his wife to dinner. They were nice girls. I remember that they took a great fancy to you, daughter. Just to think that one afternoon's visit should have opened a way like this. Isn't *living* wonderful?"

Said the daughter, "Father, the Channing girls were from Miss Bushnell's college."

"Ay," said David Ransom, "that they were. Her college and his college and our college; the very one we settled on long ago, and never changed. Did you ever see a plainer Providence than that? Well, let me read on."

The letter was long and full. Many questions that those interested might want to ask were anticipated and fully answered. It was

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

followed by other letters ; indeed, a brisk correspondence ensued, conducted at first, on their side, by David Ransom, and later by "the child," until all details connected with this wonderful opportunity were fully understood, and all plans arranged. Although the girl was troubled with some misgivings, and appalled over expenses connected with wardrobe and travel, from the first both David Ransom and his wife had such calm and triumphant assurance that all was just as it should be, that there was really nothing for her but submission. David Ransom's tones were triumphant and at the same time reverent when he said that it was as clear a case of Providence as the brindled cow had been.

"I don't talk out such things very much, daughter," he said to her one evening when she had come to bid him good night, and to give voice to certain anxieties concerning the sacrifices that he and "mother" were making in her behalf.

"I keep them to mother and me, generally ; because to talk them over seems a little like letting out secrets that were intended to be between us and the Heavenly Father ; but seeing you are troubled, I'm going to tell you that I wasn't out and out surprised by our pastor's first letter. I was expecting something that very morning. You see, we had been praying about it very particular, mother and I

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

had; we asked Heavenly Father if He could give us some kind of a notion when you was to go; and we both seemed to kind of settle down to the belief that it was to be this year.

"Well, when I was driving into town that morning I says to myself:—

"'David, you haven't got a single reason that you could tell out to anybody but mother, but you know you believe that the child will need travelling money and some extra dress money this very next fall, and you better be planning about it.' And I went at it, and the more I planned, the surer I felt that it was to be needed this year. And when I took that letter out of the office and knew the handwriting, I spoke right out before I thought, and said, 'That letter *belongs*.' The postmaster stared at me as though he thought I might have gone foolish, and he says:—

"'Yes, nobody denies that it belongs to you; it is "David Ransom" plain enough, and uncommon fine writing, too.'

"I didn't explain to him what I meant; but can't you see, daughter, how Providence was fitting things together and getting me ready to take them in? Can't my little girl trust Heavenly Father?"

By September faith had blossomed into sight. The "child" was gone, and the little wind-swept farm was lonesome. Thoughtful daughter though theirs was, old beyond her

years in her care for those two who were her world, it is doubtful if she realized the magnitude of the sacrifice that had been made for her by those more than middle-aged people. There were days when each tried to bear the burden alone, being secretly too sorry each for the other to deepen the loneliness with words. There were days when it seemed to each as though the sacrifice were almost too costly for the other to bear. Four years without her!

Undoubtedly it is a wise arrangement of Providence that the children rarely, if ever, understand to the full the sacrifices made for them by father and mother; else, for very pity, they must shrink from the cost, and so lose opportunities.

It had not been easy for David and Margaret Ransom to plan for the extra expenses. In the mere matters of dress and personal comfort their quiet sacrifices were such as the girl would not have endured, had she fully understood. But what were such sacrifices compared with the long lonely hours, when the house and the yard, yes, even the garden, gay though it was with autumn flowers, seemed clothed in desolation. They had not known, those two, that they *could* miss her so!

Yet every morning at their family altar David and Margaret Ransom thanked God for the signal way in which he had led them to the fulfilment of their hopes, and every evening,

when they commended the child to the Heavenly Father's keeping, an exalted strain of gratitude mingled with the prayer. Moreover, every letter that went to the college girl from the home, and they went as regularly as the Tuesday morning sun arose, was filled to the brim with thankfulness and good cheer.

Miss Hannah Sterns sat in her large parlor, alone. Harlan and the club and all the life that had belonged with those names, had been long gone from the room; yet it was kept in such shape that the boys might have been coming in any evening to hold a debate, and eat tea-cakes and other dainties.

Miss Hannah told no one how she missed the boys, though Miranda guessed it. Those two maiden women with mother hearts understood each other remarkably well, and had long ago grown necessary to each other's comfort.

Miranda's prophecy that Miss Hannah was being "made over" had extended no farther than to Harlan and the boys. To all others she had remained the same cold, hard, unapproachable "Miss Sterns," with her early peculiarities of dress and manner accentuated by the years. She had almost no society, although what might perhaps be called her business acquaintance with the town and county was as extensive, and her business abilities as keen as they had ever been. She accepted no social invi-

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

tations, and because of this had for years received none; nor was she ever included any more even on the most formal calling list. The town had, at last, fallen into the habits which she herself had cultivated, and she occupied in this social and democratic country the unusual position of a middle-aged intelligent woman of wealth and leisure, who was respected by everybody and intimate with no one. Her boy, Harlan, had more than fulfilled the promise of his high-school days. He had made no difficulty of winning first prizes, including the famous one for the senior debate; his own club having been so sure he would win and so altogether proud of him as to leave no room for the petty jealousies that Miss Hannah had foretold.

Long before high-school work was over it had been settled, not only that Harlan was to go to college, but which college he was to honor with his presence. Miss Hannah had made a heroic resolve to leave the choice to him, within certain limits, and no one but Miranda knew how glad she was over the fact that the college located in the city near at hand gradually took such proportions in his eyes as to shut out other views. If Harlan had gone a thousand, or even five hundred, miles away, as seemed at one time probable, Miranda often wondered how Miss Hannah could have borne it. This wonderment she kept strictly to herself, or at least to herself and Jonas, the hired man; but to

talk to him, Miranda said, was just the same as thinking, because he never said anything in reply. She was thankful that they did not need to learn how Miss Hannah would have borne long absences. Harlan came home nearly every week, and he had been known, when occasion seemed to call for it, to come in the middle of the week. Didn't he come down on Tuesday night, after being there all day Sunday — just because he remembered that it was Miss Hannah's birthday?

"Foolish boy!" she had said to him, when he kissed her and laid a bouquet of choicest roses in her lap, midwinter though it was, as he said: —

"Many happy returns, Aunt Hannah."

"Foolish boy! to waste your time and your roses on an old woman like me;" but her face had shone with a happy light, and no roses were ever cared for more tenderly than those.

Harlan's home comings, no matter how frequent, were events at the farm. They were never quite certain when he would appear, so there was always the pleasant excitement of saying, "Harlan may be out to-night," and of preparing his favorite dishes in view of the possibilities.

The first night he came home from college, having spent nearly two weeks away, marked an epoch in Miss Sterns's life. For years she had been training herself for the time when

Harlan would be too old to kiss her. She had expected it when he entered high school, and behold, the kisses had been as frequent and as hearty as before. But when the break in their life actually came, and "the boy," besides being nearly six feet tall and proportionately broad shouldered, was in very deed a college student, a man among men, then of course she must expect —

And Miss Hannah expected, and nerved herself to it. And lo, he kissed her after the old wild fashion of his boyhood, — on her cheeks, on her chin, on her gray hair, a torrent of kisses.

Miss Hannah would have died sooner than let any one know that she lay awake that night to cry happy tears over those kisses! but Miranda suspected it.

Before he had completed his college course, it became known in the neighborhood that Harlan Kingsbury was going to "keep right on studying and be a minister."

Long before this date, however, the neighborhood had accepted the young man, and prepared to be proud of him. He was undeniably "smart," as they phrased it. He was a "first-rate fellow," said the young people; and "real nice and jolly," said the children. The mothers who, almost to a unit, had gone over to his side, gratefully voted him "as good as gold." Among them were certain mothers whose young sons had found in Harlan Kings-

bury a strong friend, safe to copy, and been tided by him safely through certain dangerous shoals. As for the men of the neighborhood, they agreed that young Kingsbury was a fine fellow of whom Miss Hannah had a right to be proud.

Nevertheless, it was true that some of the hard-working farmers of the neighborhood thought that three more years of study, added to all the rest, before the young man could begin to "earn money," was rather a foolish proceeding.

"Seems a pretty big waste of time, don't it?" one old farmer asked Miss Hannah. Although he was quoted as one of the wealthiest farmers in the wealthy neighborhood, it was his boast that his own three boys had been "earning money" before they were sixteen. "How many years is it, anyhow? Five and four are nine and three are — well, about a dozen of the best years of his life a-poring over books. Seems as though they'd ought to know, before that time, how to do what they'll have to do, don't it?"

Miss Sterns considered him beneath argument, but she replied caustically that that seemed to be the way they made ministers and other leaders of the people, in these days, and if they could stand it, she could. And so, after striding boldly and triumphantly through the questioning years and silencing all her

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

critics, Miss Hannah had reached that morning, when she sat alone in her large parlor, with an open letter in her hand, and a look on her face that, despite its many wrinkles, and the fierce little knot of gray hair on the top of her head, would have carried one who had known her well back to the days when there were no wrinkles, and the hair was a rich golden brown. Something had moved her thoughts backward through the years to the time when, though she had dressed plainly, there had been about her a certain style and manner which had made people speak of her as a very fine-looking woman.

XXII.

HE "LET THINGS GO."

THE open letter that Miss Hannah held was not in Harlan's well-known hand; though the young man indulged in many little notes to her, as he had all through the years of his absence from the farm.

Sometimes there would be enclosed a picture of the new hall for students, or a photograph of his favorite professor, or it might be a pressed flower that had a long name and was boasted of as rare, and that grew "in our south meadow." Sometimes it was simply a message on a postal. "The top of the morning to you, Aunt Hannah. Isn't it a lovely day? If this weather holds, you and I will take a famous tramp next Saturday."

Aunt Hannah had been hungry for a letter that morning, and, Jonas being otherwise employed, had herself driven to the post-office, declining to wait until the afternoon.

Nor had she been disappointed. There had been a few bright lines from Harlan, which she had devoured as soon as she was seated in

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

her spring wagon, saying aloud as she read, with a shadow of a smile about her lips, "Was there ever such a boy!"

There had been another letter at which she had not even glanced, in her eagerness for Harlan's. Having quite finished his and indulged herself in thought about him, she remembered the other letter and read her name on the envelope. As she did so, the blood crept slowly over her face and forehead as though she were a girl in her teens.

The writing was somewhat irregular, as though the writer had been feeble, or extremely careless, but every curve of every letter was familiar to Hannah Sterns. There was but one person in the world who could have written on that envelope.

Miss Sterns dropped it into her bag, then gathered the reins with a determined hand, and drove home faster than Old Dexter had travelled in many days.

There was, however, no unseemly haste about her movements when she reached home. She gave account of her errands in town in her usual businesslike tones, gave to Miranda her message which "Mr. Harlan" never forgot, and finally, instead of seeking her own room, went to the parlor and locked herself in. The parlor was hopelessly associated in her mind with Ben Ransom, and she had a letter from him in her bag.

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

Only a few lines, which read thus:—

“DEAR HANNAH: I may say so, may I not? You know you were always that to me. I wonder if you can find it in your heart to come and see a poor fellow who has got, I guess, pretty near the end? I am at the hospital—as you will see by the letter head—quite broken up. I was in that railroad crash on the West Shore, of which you doubtless read. I didn’t suppose myself to be much hurt, and came on by next through train as far as this city. Queer, wasn’t it, that I should go to smash just here, when I’ve been all over the country! I don’t think the doctors have much notion of my pulling through, though as usual they keep their wisdom to themselves. It is some internal arrangement that is the worst. However, I am a wiry sort of fellow and may disappoint them yet.

“Meantime, couldn’t you be persuaded to look in upon me, for the sake of old times, and of what might have been?

“This is the first letter I have attempted, and the nurse is already looking growls at me, so I will not try to move you by eloquence but will throw myself on your mercy, only waiting to add that I am a homeless friendless fellow.

“Yours, in the name of ‘Auld lang syne,’
“BEN RANSOM.”

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

Miss Hannah read this letter through three times, with long pauses between each reading, during which she stared blankly at the mantel-piece.

Benjamin Ransom in the city but a few miles distant, ill, perhaps dying, and alone. Such was the situation her mind was gazing at.

Why did he care to see her? What had become of Lucy? Should she go to him? These were the questions around which her thoughts revolved.

The letter sounded like the Benjamin Ransom she used to know; perhaps he had not greatly changed in any respect: while she — Did he expect to find in her the Hannah Sterns he used to know?

“*Dear Hannah!*” What right had he to call her that? Still, she was an old woman now, and if she thought him as ill as he professed, why —

She arose and walked over to the tall old-fashioned, gilt-framed mirror set into the end wall of the long room, and took a deliberate survey, trying to contrast the woman she saw there with the one on whom Mr. Ransom had looked when he was last in that room. Undoubtedly she had changed far more than he; women generally did change more than men, and besides, she was older than he. Certainly she had changed, her hair was quite gray, and she was, in short, an old woman. That her

manner of dressing her hair and herself accentuated the years Miss Hannah did not doubt, but no thought of making any changes even entered her mind. There had been moments in her life when she had almost wished, for Harlan's sake, that she had not permitted herself to dress in a fashion so utterly out of accord with the prevailing mode, but the habit once formed, she had resolved that she would never make herself the subject of remark by changing. She was grimly glad that Harlan was a man of too much sense to care about such things. She felt quite sure that Mr. Ransom was not, but she had nothing to do with him. Still, ought one to deny the request of a man who might be dying?

She looked at the letter again and noted that it was visiting day at the hospital. Then she looked at her watch, and thought of trains. Miss Hannah had not visited the city so close at hand in more than five years, but she saw in that fact no reason why she should not go if she chose.

Jonas was bringing a basket of baking apples to Miranda, when their mistress appeared in the back doorway and electrified them.

"Jonas, have you unharnessed Dexter? Well, then, you may harness him again and drive me to town. I'm going to the city on the 10:19 train. I shall come back, probably, on the 5:23, and you must be there to meet it. Perhaps

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

you better take this afternoon to drive over to Melbourne to see about that cow; it will just about give you time to get back for the train."

Jonas was speechless with amazement, but Miranda said:—

"Good land, Miss Hannah! You going to the city, and all alone?"

"No," said Miss Hannah, with dignity, "I presume not; I have no reason to suppose they will get up a special for my benefit; I'm taking the regular train, and it is likely that the usual number of travellers will be on hand."

Miranda could not be quenched; she hovered about her mistress like an anxious hen whose well-behaved mate had suddenly been changed into a duckling. She had been to the city herself within the year, and had a vivid recollection of the terrors and perils of the way. Once she ventured a remonstrance.

"Hadn't Jonas better go with you, Miss Hannah? or me? I could plan to go as well as not."

Miss Hannah turned keen gray eyes upon her.

"What for?" she asked. "Do you think I am in my dotage, or too young to be trusted alone?"

Then she relented, as a sudden thought occurred to her, and said kindly:—

"You needn't be worrying about Mr. Harlan; my business has nothing to do with him, and I don't expect to have time even to see

him, unless he happens to come out to-night on the same train."

But as to what the business was, Miranda and Jonas were left to conjecture, which they did almost without ceasing throughout that long summer day; being unable, once Harlan was counted out, to settle upon any motive sufficiently strong to take Miss Hannah to the city. Had not Miranda heard her say more than once, and that very lately, that she hoped Providence would never plan it so that she should have to set foot there again?

"It must be something about stocks and bonds," said Jonas, at last. "They are troublesome things both of them, I know that."

And Miranda looked at him with respect and was silent.

A clean-shaven man, with his head carefully bandaged, lay in one of the private rooms of the great city hospital; a white-capped hospital nurse was moving about with swift quiet steps, removing specks of dust in a room that to ordinary eyes was already speckless. The screen that shut off the view of the wide hall had been set back from the open door, because the patient liked to watch the tide of life continually flowing through. It was "Outside day" at the hospital, and though it was still quite early, friends of the patients were already taking advantage of the opportunity.

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

The man on the bed as he watched the arrivals wondered if he, too, would have a visitor. He had been for several weeks in the hospital, and was becoming familiar with some of the faces of callers. There was that hungry-eyed mother whose boy lay in the incurable ward. *She* hadn't given him up, though the doctors had; one could see it in her eyes. And there came the brother of the young man who had the serious operation; he was as regular as the sun, and he was not a young man, either; he was old, almost as old as Dave. What if Dave should come to see him? Dave would, in a minute, if he only knew, and could. With the thought, a miserable longing for something like home ties surged over the man again, making him realize how weak he was. It had been some such feeling which had caused him to write a letter to Hannah Sterns. Would it do any good?

This wonderment was floating for the dozenth time through his mind when suddenly he opened his eyes and there she stood in the doorway! He knew her in an instant; but his very first thought was, "Goodness! what a fright she has made of herself!"

They meant a great deal to him, the changes; they dismayed him. The Hannah Sterns that he remembered had not been young; he had never at any time thought of her as young, but always as a woman of fine

presence whose dress and manner would commend her to strangers as a person of consequence. Without fully analyzing the feeling, he knew now that there had been satisfaction in the thought of letting that dignified white-robed nurse see his friend, Miss Sterns. Behold here she was in a style of dress that was more befitting the stout German market women on the square than the owner of real estate that must now be valued by hundreds of thousands.

If he had imagined such a state of things, it is doubtful if Ben Ransom would ever have written that letter. But he had written it, and must make the best of it.

"You didn't expect to see me cut up in this way, did you? Would you have known me, do you think, if I hadn't been wearing this turban? Oh, yes, the turban covers some interesting bruises, and I'm smashed up pretty generally. They call the internal injuries the worst, I believe, though the external ones have been mighty inconvenient. Well, I'm glad to see an old friend, at least. It is hard on a fellow to lie here and feel that there are none to care whether he pulls through or not."

"Have you no family, Benjamin? You had children."

"I have nobody. My two boys died when they were babies, and poor Lucy never got over it. It is more than twenty years since I

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

buried her. I've had a hard life, Hannah, a confoundedly hard life, in more ways than one."

"And your little girl, Benjamin? I heard there was a little girl. Did she, too, die young?"

Ben Ransom hesitated. Those keen gray eyes that once he used to think had a mysterious power over him were fixed on his face. He could not talk glibly.

"I don't know," he said slowly. "That is, I think—well, to tell the truth I never knew the particulars. It was a dreadful time, Hannah. Lucy, it seems, was sick; I did not realize it at the time; I knew of course that she was ailing, that she wasn't strong, but I thought it was chiefly low spirits. I had to be away from home most of the time, but she had the child, and was bound up in her. I couldn't help the conditions. I've had the most confounded luck financially since I left this part of the world. My business kept me travelling day and night, and I never realized how miserable Lucy was. It seems she got to feeling that she might die and leave the baby alone, and it preyed upon her; she never had much strength of mind, you know. What did she do but start on a long journey, while I was away, to take the baby to Dave! You remember I used to talk about my brother Dave? And it was on her return trip that she died. It was a terrible shock, Hannah. I reached

home that night to find only a deserted house, but she had left a letter for me, and I started out again at once to find her. But I never saw her alive."

"And the child?" said Miss Sterns, after she had said to the husband what she could. "Did you lose her at that time?"

Ben Ransom was silent for so long that the nurse in the back part of the room took a step or two forward, but just then he spoke.

"Hannah, it will sound horrid to you, I know, but I may as well tell you the truth. I don't know anything about the child, except that I suppose she died. She was a frail little thing, and she couldn't have had proper care during that journey. I always thought Lucy couldn't have been in her right mind when she started. I was so cut up, and so distracted with financial troubles, too, that I just let it go. I meant, of course, to write to Dave immediately, but I shrank from it—you know how one would shrink from such a letter as I would have to write, and kept putting it off and putting it off. Then I got to feeling that I couldn't write, ever, and didn't want to hear from him. I thought it would be a story of just another grave, and it seemed to me I had had enough. I don't know how to tell it; it sounds rather monstrous, I dare say, put into words, but I just drifted on through the years, having poor luck, in business, always, and let things go."

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

"And you may have a grown-up daughter hunting all the time for her father!"

Though she were speaking to a dying man — which however she did not believe — Miss Sterns could not have kept back this thrust.

"Well, as to that," said Ben Ransom. "I had no hope, you see, of any such thing. I knew as well as I wanted to know that the child died; she was always frail, frailer than the others, and they died. I knew Lucy got her safely to Dave, some way, for she would never have let her out of her arms to any one else, and I knew that Dave and his wife could do a thousand times more for her while she did live than I ever could. And I never got enough ahead so I could pay them for what they had done, and I just did nothing."

Miss Sterns suddenly turned her face toward the open door as though attracted by some noise outside. It was because, since the man was ill, and might perhaps be worse than appeared, an instinct of humanity held her from letting him see the contempt she felt. For that she knew was the name of the feeling surging through her; contempt, not at first even mixed with pity. By his own confession this man had neglected his wife until in her illness she was driven to straits, and, then having buried her, had not felt enough interest in his own child to learn ever, through the years, whether it lived or died! And this was the man she had once loved!

XXIII.

“LISTEN !”

MISS HANNAH went home on the 5:23 train, and although she made no sign either to Miranda or Jonas, she knew that she was much shaken.

She was up at her usual hour the next morning, and to the two attendants who believed that they had her in charge seemed much as usual; but the truth was that during the week which followed she grew old fast. She was an old woman to have such work thrust upon her: to find that some of the illusions of her youth that she thought buried long ago were being but now dispelled, and bringing in their train the inevitable pain belonging to such illusions. It is true she had not been young in years when she first met Ben Ransom; but the heart has its blossoming season, and if its spring comes late, it is none the less spring. She had given the pent-up love of her youth to Mr. Ransom, and all through the years of their separation, unknown even to herself, she had been cherishing the memory of an ideal. And the reality as revealed in the middle-aged man on that white

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

bed was as unlike the ideal as possible. For the first time in her life she was seeing Ben Ransom as he really was. Or no—that may not be quite fair. The glamour which the years and her memories had unconsciously woven about the man had been rudely dispelled by the interview of the day before, and the pendulum of her judgment in trying to get its balance may perhaps have swung to the other extreme. For the time being the woman's heart recoiled from him as from an abnormal creation. A father who had not interest enough in his own child even to learn whether it had lived or died!

Gradually the intensity of her recoil subsided and left room for pity that any man had made so small a thing of life that at middle age he could lie helpless in a hospital with no one to care whether or not he "pulled through."

By the next visiting day Miss Sterns had decided that it was her duty to visit Mr. Ransom again. Since she was apparently his only friend, it behooved her to see that he had whatever was needful for his comfort.

At the door she came in contact with one of the doctors and learned from him what sent her to the sick room with a heavy sense of responsibility. Although in accordance with the habits of his profession the doctor was reticent, she gathered that they had not very much expectation of Mr. Ransom's recovery. He

might linger for some time ; in such conditions as his it was impossible to foretell. Oh, yes, of course, there was a possibility of his getting up again. No ; he could not say with any degree of assurance how it would be. Well, yes, the chances were against him, but still — And with such information she was obliged to be content.

It came to her as a solemn fact that for the first time in her busy life she was being brought into close contact with one who was perhaps slipping rapidly away from time, and had made no definite preparation for eternity. Ought she to say something to him about it? What was there that she could say, all unused as she was to conversation upon such themes? Perhaps it might startle him, even make him worse ; but — was a man to be allowed to slip out of life unwarned in any way for fear of startling him? It was with the dread of responsibility strong upon her that she tried to shape the talk toward something that might be helpful.

Mr. Ransom's mood did not assist her. He was unquestionably glad to see her, and welcomed with a kind of boyish delight the bottle of beef broth and the jar of home-made jelly that she had been allowed to bring to him.

"I have not had anything in ages that tasted like a home," he told her. "I remember your beef broth, Hannah ; queer that I should, isn't

it? Don't you know that time when I had a wretched cold, and couldn't eat any of Mrs. Brower's dainties, and you fed me up on toast and beef broth—the most delicious stuff—and petted me all the evening? I remember everything about those old days, I think.

“What have you been doing since you were here? It seems an eternity. I never before had the least idea how long a week could be. Couldn't you get a permit and come oftener? They do it, some of them. You have to go through a lot of red tape, but it pays, for the victims, anyhow. You have no idea what it means for a fellow to lie here with nothing to do but think, especially when he has such a confounded mess of things to think about as I have. Life has dealt hardly by me, Hannah; I haven't had half a chance. And now I can't even turn myself in bed, but must keep exactly the same position until the nurse makes up her mind that the time has come for a change; it is her mind that settles it, you see, not mine. I have nothing more to do with it than a griddle-cake has in being turned. For an unmethodical happy-go-lucky sort of fellow like me the eternal machinery of hospital life is maddening. Does Miranda make as fine griddle-cakes as she used to? I can feel them in my mouth this minute. Do you remember that night when the storm came on, and you insisted on my spending the night and staying

to breakfast? What griddle-cakes those were! Why doesn't Miranda come and see me? Is she as homely as ever, and as proper? She was awfully proper in those days; young as she was, I used to be half afraid of her. Pity I hadn't been more so!" The sentence ended in a sigh. It was impossible for Miss Sterns not to know that he was thinking of the days when she was absent from home and Lucy came; and Miranda, not very sure of what was going on, was still suspicious and dignified. If she had kept Lucy more carefully, or if she, Hannah Sterns, had not gone to the mountains with her friend, and if—she turned with a kind of sore disgust from her own thoughts.

She tried to turn the thoughts of the sick man to more important themes, and found it impossible. He was determined to linger dreamily in a half-luxurious melancholy with the hours of their connected past; and yet the years had swept in between and separated them, making a gulf that seemed impassable; she felt it sharply. They seemed not to have one idea in common. Besides, awed as she was by that solemn sense of responsibility, she felt it almost sinful to listen to his trivialities.

At last his attention was arrested.

"Hark!" he said, interrupting a platitude that she was trying to make sound natural. "Listen! there is that college girl again singing to the incurables; she was here last week,

before you came. She has a wonderful voice and is a remarkably pretty girl. I caught a glimpse of her when they were leaving. There are three of them, and I knew by her face which one had the voice; there is a quality in it that one doesn't find every day, Listen! Do you see how it swells into fulness on the high notes? It reminds me of the meadow-larks that used to sing back of our log cabin. It reminds me, too, of something else. Did you ever know, Hannah, that Lucy had an unusual quality in her voice? If it had been cultivated, she could have made a sensation in the world; she had as pure a voice on high notes as this one; but of course it wasn't cultivated. Poor Lucy!" Again there was that long-drawn sigh. But in the next second he said:—

"I wish she would come and sing to me. Why can't I have them in here? I'm sure I need amusing as much as the incurables. Who knows but I am one of them myself? Besides, they at least are together and can stare at one another for amusement, while I have nothing to look at but these horribly white walls. I'll never have a white wall in my room when once I get out of this. I say, nurse, why can't those girls come and sing for me?"

The nurse smiled indulgently and went to interview the house surgeon, and finally the singers.

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

The result was that they presently took their station in the doorway leading into the private room and sang a trio in which their voices blended exquisitely. Then the girl in white sang alone, and with a voice that seemed to reach to the farthest recess of that great building, and yet be tender and sweet for the people in that one room.

“Hark, hark, my soul ! angelic songs are swelling
O'er earth's green fields and ocean's wave-beat shore ;
How sweet the truth those blessed strains are telling
Of that new life where sin shall be no more.

“Onward we go, yet still we hear them singing,
‘Come, weary souls, for Jesus bids you come ;’
And through the dark, its echoes sweetly ringing,
The music of the gospel leads us home.

“Far, far away, like bells at evening pealing,
The voice of Jesus sounds o'er land and sea,
And laden souls by thousands meekly stealing,
Kind Shepherd, turn their weary steps to Thee.”

When the voice ceased the tears were following one another down Mr. Ransom's face. It was evident that the girl was singing for a purpose ; she put her whole soul into the words, and they became at once an appeal and a prayer. She came swiftly forward when the sick man made known his wish to speak to her, and she looked her disappointment when all he said was : —

“I had a daughter once — if she had lived

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

she would be about your age, and I think she would have sung, though perhaps not like you. Your voice is wonderful, my dear. Will you come again and sing to me?"

He talked about her after she had gone.

"She is a beauty," he said. "Isn't it wonderful how a pretty face can charm? What a thing it would be to have a daughter who looked like her and could sing like her!"

"Why should you think you care?" asked Miss Sterns brusquely. "You do not even know whether yours is living or dead."

"Oh, yes, I do; she died, of course. I have always lost everything, Hannah, that was worth having; it was my fate. It is probably just as well that she died; she would have had to be brought up in sordid poverty, with no opportunity to learn to sing, or do anything worth doing. Unless —" he hesitated, was silent for a moment, then looked up with a smile, — "I used to dream that you would take a fancy to one of my babies, perhaps, and do great things for him — make him your heir, you know. That would have been a sort of poetic justice, wouldn't it? But my boys both died."

Another minute of silence, then he added, linking his sentence to the former one, as though in his mind there was some connection: "Still, when I get about again I'm going to write to Dave and find out the facts; I have

always meant to do it. Poor old Dave! he did his level best, I know. He got his watch again, anyway; I'm glad of that."

"His watch?" said Miss Hannah, quickly. Was there really connection in this talk or was his mind wandering?

"Yes; father's watch. Do you remember that old turnip I used to carry? Father left it for Dave, and he lent it to me until I could afford to get a decent one. I was always ashamed of it, but I was a long time in getting a better one. After I did, I used to plan, every time I came home, to send the old thing back to Dave. He was a queer fellow and felt attached to it; but I never got around to sending it. And when Lucy took the baby to him, what did she do but sew the old thing up in the baby's little petticoat so Dave could have it! There was a queer sentimental streak about Lucy, too. Did you know it? She and Dave would have got on well together. If she had stayed there with them until I got around, it would have been better for her. Dave would have been a good friend, and so would his wife. Well, I shall certainly write to them the first thing I do."

The closing words drew Miss Hannah back to that sharp sense of responsibility. She wondered if she ought to ask if he felt sure of getting around again, or whether the question would excite him.

"Don't you want me to read to you?" she

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

asked at last. He looked surprised over the abrupt transition.

"I don't know," he said listlessly. "What is there to read? Nurse did the morning paper for me before you came. But you do read aloud extremely well, I remember. You used to read to your father, didn't you? — and your grandmother?"

"There is a Bible over on the table." Miss Hannah spoke in a vigorous almost belligerent tone, and Mr. Ransom laughed.

"I never took much to Bible reading," he said. "I would rather hear it sung. What were those words she sang out there to the incurables?"

"'I am the Resurrection and the Life,' that was it. And the Life, the Life! Over and over it went. Ah, well, life is a great thing. My, but she has a voice! Won't she make a stir in the world, though!"

"Well, Hannah, if you really think a chapter out of the old book will be good for me, I can stand it, I guess. But they read the Bible, you know, to fellows who are not going to get well; and I've made up my mind to disappoint them and pull through."

"Some fellows who are going to live, read the Bible to help them make something worth while of their lives," Miss Hannah said grimly.

"I s'pose that's true. I used to read it myself when I was a little chap. I read a chapter

aloud to mother every night for a while. If I had kept it up, I might have been a different creature — who knows? Still, Hannah, I've always been a pretty decent sort of chap, 'pon honor I have. It's my confounded luck that has brought me here with just enough money to get me a private room. I shall write to Dave, though, you can depend upon that. Or I'll go and see him; that might be better yet. If my little girl lived, and she happened to be pretty and sweet, that would be a fine thing for a fellow, wouldn't it? See here, I've just had an idea: she might have a voice! Her mother had, upon my word she did. I used to think it was worth cultivating; and a girl could make her fortune with such a voice."

Miss Hannah did not get the Bible. The man's intense selfishness, as well as the lightness of his tone, repelled her. Of what use to read sacred words to him? Those tears had been mere sentiment. She lost the feeling that he might be going to die, and believed, with him, that he would "pull through."

She went away earlier than there was need, and would not promise to come again before the next visitor's day. She had matters of business to attend to which would take her time.

Of course, she was a woman of business. She had to be. She flushed angrily over his careless —

"Oh, Hannah, if you hadn't got tired of me

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

and thrown me over, I would have saved you all this!"

What right had he to speak in that way to an old woman? And then to say that it was she who tired of him!

On the following Thursday a belated train and a block on the street car made her an hour late. The college girls were there and had been singing to Mr. Ransom. The doctor was also there, and with his fingers on the sick man's pulse, while the nurse stood close at hand holding a bottle and a spoon. Miss Sterns gave a startled questioning look at the doctor, who answered it with a grave bow. At that moment the sick man opened his eyes and spoke distinctly.

"Is there any one here who will pray?"

The doctor turned inquiring eyes on the elderly woman, whose face was tense with feeling. But Hannah Sterns had never in her life breathed a word of prayer for other ear than God's. It seemed to her that even to save a life she could make no audible sound.

The doctor was not a man of prayer, but he had had a praying mother, and it seemed to him hard to have a soul start on the unknown road with his last request denied.

"It must be soon to be of any avail," he said significantly, turning his face toward the guests. There was an instant movement among the singers, and the one in white came swiftly for-

ward as noiselessly as a snowflake, and, kneeling, laid a quieting hand on the restless fingers that were groping among the bedclothes, and lifted that passing soul on the wings of prayer into the very presence-chamber of the infinite Saviour. And none in the waiting company, least of all the girl herself, who prayed as though she and he and Jesus Christ were all that there was of both worlds, knew that she was presenting to the Omnipotent Christ the desperate needs of her own father.

Yet it was surely David Ransom who had taught the child how to pray.

XXIV.

“That short, potential stir
That each can make but once.”

“IT was very sudden at the last,” said the nurse to Miss Hannah. “Cases of this kind often are. As soon as I came on duty this morning I saw there had been a change; but I didn’t think, even then, that the end was so near. I thought of you right away, but you hadn’t left any word about being sent for; and, anyhow, I knew you would be here, likely, this morning. If your train had been on time, you would have had a chance to —”

She broke off with that, and began again: “He asked once or twice what time it was, and if you had come; and he was growing weak so fast that at last we ’phoned, and found that the train was late. It seems too bad, doesn’t it, when you have been so good to him?”

The nurse’s manner was very respectful. She knew Miss Sterns well by reputation, and had been duly impressed with the care and attention shown to a stranger who had confessed some weeks before that he couldn’t occupy a private room very long, for want of means.

The college girls went away in haste, wiping

tears from their eyes, and drawing their large hats well over their disturbed faces. They were young, and death in any form was a solemn and awesome matter to them.

"I'm so glad you could do that wonderful thing for him," said the youngest of the three, linking her arm in that of the soloist, and kissing her under cover of the hall before they passed out. "It was beautiful, dear, and it would have killed me to have him die without a prayer, when he had asked for it; but I couldn't have done what you did, to save my life."

Miss Hannah had no tears to shed. She was dignified almost to grimness, and never more businesslike.

She conferred with the physician in attendance, and with the representatives of the Board of Managers, making all necessary arrangements, and answering all questions with her usual brevity.

There were no friends, so far as she knew, who could be summoned. There had been a brother, but it was not certain that he was living, and she had no clew to his whereabouts. There had been, she believed, no communication between the brothers for years. Certainly she would try to discover him, and make every effort to get the valise and valuables belonging to the deceased into his hands. In the meantime, however, all proper arrangements must be made, and the bills rendered

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

to her. Mr. Ransom was a family acquaintance of long standing; his wife had at one time been a member of her own family, and she was evidently the only person left to look after details. For the present, the only thing to be done was to lay the body to rest in the Sterns burial-place. Later, if there should be occasion, a removal could of course be effected. It was many years since the wife was buried, and Miss Sterns had not the remotest idea where she was laid.

"I did not think he was going to die," she said, looking firmly at the doctor. "There are matters about which I should have felt that I ought to have conferred with him if I had had any conception of such a result as this; but I believed, as he did, that he would get up again."

The doctor, who also knew Miss Sterns very well by reputation, felt his color rise a little at the implied rebuke, which was more in her tone than her words, and answered quickly that while, as he had told her on their first interview, he had not felt that there was much prospect of a recovery, still the end had been unexpectedly sudden to them all. They did not presume to be very wise with regard to this matter of death, and always answered questions with becoming caution. Still, if he had not understood that the patient was an old friend of Miss Sterns, he should have asked for some instructions himself. And then the

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

doctor felt that he and Miss Sterns were even.

Two carriages, in addition to the one for the bearers, followed Ben Ransom's body to its resting-place. In one, the Sterns family carriage which was used only on state occasions, sat Miss Hannah and her adopted nephew, Harlan Kingsbury, he having been summoned by a letter whose brevity was characteristic.

"DEAR HARLAN: An old acquaintance of mine who died two days ago at the hospital is to be buried here to-day. I want you to come and say a prayer at the grave. You can take the 2:10 train, the one on which they bring the body, and it will not take a great deal of your time. It seems fitting that your first official duty should be for an acquaintance of the family. I shall meet the train."

"What is all this, Aunt Hannah?" the young man asked as he seated himself opposite her in the closed carriage in which he had not rode half a dozen times in his life.

"'An old acquaintance,' you said. Have I ever heard of him? Is he an old man? How did you come in touch with him? Your letter, you see, told me nothing."

"I found him at the hospital, Harlan. He sent for me and I went in twice to see him. It is more than a quarter of a century since I knew

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

him, but he married his wife from my house; she was in my employ. He buried her long ago, and there was no one left but me to bury him. Now don't ask any more questions; you can see for yourself that there is nothing more to tell. I'm going to bury him in our family lot because there is no other place over which I have control, and it is large enough for a dozen more graves."

Harlan Kingsbury was used to his aunt and obeyed her literally and cheerfully. He was a very new minister, having been ordained but a few weeks, and it seemed to him a beautiful coincidence that his first official duty should be at least remotely connected with the family of which he had for so many years made one.

"It is just like you, Aunt Hannah," he said, taking her large work-worn hand in both of his, as the carriage wound among the quiet avenues and halted before the carefully kept plot whose handsome centre marble bore the family name.

"I don't know another person who would have done it, but it is a beautiful thing to do."

He believed that he understood the situation perfectly. When he called, as he did on the following evening, on the college girl who was the solo singer of the college trio, he told her that he had been down in the country to officiate at his first funeral, — and that the interment was in their family burial plot; the dead man having been the husband

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

of a maid who was, years ago, in his aunt's employ, and had been married from their house. The girl-wife had died when she was young, and the husband was old and poor. The college girl was deeply interested and sympathetic, and agreed with him that such tokens of remembrance and regard bestowed upon old servants were unusual and royal. Then she opened her lips to tell him of the old man at the hospital who had died so suddenly, with none of his own about him; but she closed them again. He might question, and her part in that death scene was something which was not to be talked about.

The other carriage that followed to the grave that day held Miranda and Jonas, dressed in their Sunday best and sitting side by side in solemn state.

When they spoke it was in subdued tones such as people use in the presence of death.

"Ain't it a mite queer," murmured Jonas, "to bury him right in with the family this way, when he ain't any relation at all? She must have a lot of old acquaintances."

"Well," said Miranda; then she was still.

After a solemn silence she began again in whispers, as if she feared the leaves and the birds that, save for the crunching of their carriage wheels on the gravel, were making the only sounds in that quiet place: "I've never breathed it to a living soul, and I know you won't; but since you are one of the family, as

it were, and it must seem kind of strange to you, I'll tell you that the man we are going to lay in the Sterns family burying-ground expected, years ago, as much as he expected to die sometime, and I don't know but more, — he wasn't the kind of man you would think ever meant to die, — to marry Miss Hannah ! ”

“ Poor soul ! ” said Jonas. He was thinking of Miss Hannah.

They buried him with all the circumstance belonging to people of consequence. One who had known Ben Ransom well could almost have fancied his being pleased with the quality of rosewood and satin and silver that contributed to the beauty of his narrow house, as well as with the fact that he was, after all, to lie in the Sterns family burial-ground.

“ Let everything be done properly,” Miss Hannah had said to the undertaker, and he had obeyed her.

As for the services at the grave, the middle-aged men, — stanch admirers of Miss Hannah, — who served as bearers, agreed among themselves that it was wonderful what talent that young fellow had. To think that a boy they had known all their lives could make such a prayer as that — Miss Hannah might well be proud of him.

Poor Miss Hannah ! that was one time in her life of loyal service to Harlan Kingsbury, when her thoughts deserted him.

While the others listened with reverently lifted hats and bowed heads to his fine rendering of the familiar words : —

“ I am the resurrection and the life : he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live,” she heard not a word. Not even of that beautiful prayer, into which Harlan, being very young, could not help weaving a tribute of respect for the “ friend who was not withholding even the last resting-place of her beloved dead from service in the interest of others.”

This struck Miranda as so appropriate and touching that she cried, and even Jonas got out a clean white handkerchief and blew a trumpet blast ; but to Miss Hannah in that hour was given the bitterness of a time long past. Instead of spring it was autumn, and the brilliant autumn leaves were being swept into glowing heaps by one named Lucy ; and a young man was walking beside her, talking gayly ; and they stopped together under the great elm tree, and the young man stooped and kissed the girl. Why should Hannah Sterns, spinster, gray haired and wrinkled, standing at an open grave, lose herself in such a scene as that ?

One thing she thought as, the burial service ended, she went back to her carriage, — which was, that if by any means it could be discovered where Lucy's dust was lying, it should be brought to lie beside her husband's.

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

To this end, and also of course to try to find "Dave," Miss Hannah during the two following weeks gave herself to the patient going over of note-books, account-books, business letters, and indeed any scrap of paper belonging to Ben Ransom which his valise, and the business house by which he had been employed, could furnish. And she found no clew to either. She marvelled much that a firm with which a man had held fairly satisfactory business relations for ten years could know so little about him. It was evidently true, as Mr. Ransom had told her, that he had been merely a machine for them that would be worked as long as it turned in the money, and when that failed, be turned out to rust.

There were certain fragments of letters that Miss Hannah picked from among the scraps and glanced at here and there for a moment, then held herself from their reading. Ill spelled, badly written as they were, she knew that they were scraps of letters from a wife to her husband. Letters that had the appearance of happening to fall among a rubbish of waste papers, rather than of having been saved, but Miss Sterns resolved to hold them sacred; there was scarcely a possibility that they had even mentioned "Dave," much less given his address. After holding them in irresolute hands for a full half hour, she went toward the great fireplace and dropped them in. Given the bare possibility that Benjamin Ransom had a daughter

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

on the earth, and that they two might some time or other meet, there was surely no reason why those ill-spelled scrawls from her dead mother's hand, being intended only for her dead father's eyes, should be held to give the daughter pain. She would do, so far as possible, as she would be done by, and she applied the match and watched the poor fragments turn to ashes.

She was very quiet about her search after Dave. Assured that there was no one in touch with her present life who could help her, she shrank from the talk that the knowledge of her effort would make. There had been talk enough already. The neighbors could not easily give up the marvel of having the Sterns burial-ground invaded by a stranger.

Not that they disapproved; the neighborhood almost to a woman had, as the years passed, grown only kindly in their feeling toward Miss Hannah. She was much richer than any of them, but she did not parade her wealth, and she did much good with it. They knew that no case of need was ever brought in vain to her notice. And now that Harlan had grown to be one of whom they could all be proud, they all — unless one must except portions of the Collins family — agreed that in bringing up and educating a real foreign missionary, Miss Hannah had done a good thing, and one that honored the neighborhood as well as the church to which they chiefly belonged. For by this

time it had become quite generally known that Harlan Kingsbury meant, at no distant day, to go to Japan. Just what he could do "away out there" with all the money that Miss Hannah would probably leave him, they were not quite sure; still, it was remembered that mission fields were always needing money, and if Miss Hannah liked to use hers in that way, she certainly had a right. Being in this mind, they all agreed that, while it was an unusual thing, it was like Miss Hannah, and was really very nice indeed to bury the husband of an old servant in the family ground. And they talked enough about it to create Miss Hannah's one regret for having done so. Certainly she would not set them talking afresh. Not even Harlan heard about her search. Why should he? Of course he could not help her, and he was very busy indeed just now about his own affairs. So she inserted at much expense her carefully worded personals in many Western local papers, and "Dave," whose old eyes never rested on one of them, wrote regularly to the college girl, who had a charming light on her face one evening when she said, in answer to a question put by Harlan Kingsbury, who was calling on her:—

"It has been a good day to me from first to last. I passed, you see, in one of my hardest examinations, and then—I had such a dear letter from father just this morning, that it brightened all the day."

XXV.

SOCIAL PROBLEMS.

THE face of the Rev. Harlan Kingsbury was not in its usual calm. There was a little pucker between the eyes, an inheritance from some perplexed ancestor, that never made itself visible except when a knotty problem was before him.

He had been "down home"—which was the way in which he always referred to Miss Hannah's place in the country—for over night, and Jonas had just left him at the station to wait for the express that would take him back to town. Truth to tell he had come to the country the night before with the intention of making a longer stay than this, having planned to give Aunt Hannah an entire week day and part of another,—a luxury which she had not enjoyed for some time. Seminary work was now quite over, his plans for the coming season were arranged, and while he lingered for Commencement week and the various reunions and festivities connected with his class in college, he could well afford to

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

indulge his aunt in an extra amount of his company.

He had planned carefully to give her as much of his time as possible, sacrificing a little to do so. For instance, there was a certain function set for that afternoon which was chiefly interesting to him because the girl who nearly always dressed in white and was the best singer in college would be a central feature of the occasion; but he confessed, strictly to himself, that she was that to him of all occasions, and he must sacrifice something.

It came to pass, however, that at the farm he had fallen in with a problem so bewildering that it had sent him back to town to study out in solitude just what could be done about it.

The painful truth is that for so strong a mind as Harlan Kingsbury undoubtedly possessed it was a very weak problem indeed. But there are times and occasions, it seems, when even strong minds exhibit weaknesses, and the plain truth shall be spoken.

It did not detract from the wrinkles on his troubled forehead to realize that he had brought his problem upon himself. It had been done in the most innocent of ways. He had been helping certain of his friends to send out the invitations for Commencement week, and had pleased himself by writing Aunt Hannah's name with many flourishes on one of the great square envelopes.

"Miss Hannah Sterns." He had smiled to himself to think how well he knew her; how she would affect the most perfect indifference to invitations in general and that one in particular, yet in her secret soul would be pleased with the attention, and lay the cards away among her treasures.

But he had not yet fathomed the depths of Miss Hannah's nature. Behold, she had announced to him but the evening before that she was going to Commencement! "I've got my invitation," she said, glancing complacently at the card in her work-basket, "and I've made up my mind to go. I don't suppose you had the least idea that I would, when you sent it; but if you didn't, you've got your punishment, you see, for I shall be there. It is a long time since I've been to any public doings, in town or anywhere else, for that matter; but I have my reasons for wanting to see this thing through, and I've decided to do it."

To say that Harlan Kingsbury was dismayed is to put it mildly. For the moment he was struck dumb; no words of which he could think being equal to the situation. Aunt Hannah at Commencement! She had never been five miles away from home since he had known her, save on strictly business errands, and to go to a social function of any sort had seemed to him as impossible for her as it would have been for one of the stone pillars at

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

the great gate. As for conceiving of her presence in the great Assembly Hall among the throngs of well-dressed women who honored the college functions with their presence, he felt that the wildest flights of his imagination had not been equal to it. Aunt Hannah in her straight black dress without gore or train or flounce or pucker beyond what was absolutely necessary; in her strong, wide, calfskin boots, the narrow skirts just reaching to their tops; in her little knot of gray hair, twisted on the back of her head at just the right height to spoil its shape, and thrust through with a hair-pin or two; in her round old-fashioned waist, too low, and at the same time too high, in the neck to simulate either of the styles in vogue; though all that the young minister knew about it was that it was "queer," somehow; quite unlike others.

There had been discussions before this day with regard to this matter of dress. When Harlan was younger and with less knowledge of human nature than he believed he now possessed, he had made certain attempts to modernize his aunt's ideas and had met with failure.

"You stick to your books," she had said in tones more grim than were often used for him, "and let my ways alone. I dress you according to your notions and the notions of others. That is because I don't think you've got mind

enough to go against the crowd. You are pretty smart, I know, as smart as they make them nowadays, perhaps, but you haven't grit enough for that. I have, and I don't intend to take to any of their fool ways. I've got a kind of dress that suits me and that I'm used to, and I shall stick to it as long as I live. And when I'm gone where I can't attend to it, see that you do it for me. A plain black alpaca without fuss or furbelows, remember, when I lie in my coffin."

Long before this time Harlan had given up talking about a matter which had never troubled him much. Everybody in her world knew and respected his Aunt Hannah without the slightest regard to what she wore; and she rarely went outside of her world.

Still, he was well aware that if she were at any time set down in a modern parlor, surrounded by women dressed in the trains and trimmings of to-day, she would undoubtedly create a sensation. The very collar which she wore on her too low-necked dress, a plain wide round linen such as middle-aged women wore when she was twenty, would be startling to eyes unused.

The young minister tried to fancy her in the Assembly Hall with the strange-shaped bonnet that had been her best as far back as he could remember her, and tried to think whether she would look most conspicuous with or without

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

a bonnet, and groaned in spirit over the thought of either appearance.

Yet he had no hope of effecting any changes. If she had been "set in her ways," as Miranda had accused her, when he was a boy, she had not grown less so with the added years. Whatever she realized would directly affect the interests of her boy she was willing to sacrifice for, but he had no hope of being able to make her understand what it would be to him to introduce her to the fashionable world; at least not without hurting her feelings, and he told himself sternly that not for all the hopes and dreams he had, connected with this very Commencement season, would he make any move or say any word that could hurt her.

Putting away therefore the hope of effecting any change in her plans, he set himself to discovering whether or not she had modified her own views of late.

"Aunt Hannah, what are you going to wear to Commencement?" This was the question that he finally asked, having studied over it for half an hour to try to make it sound unstudied.

She had sewed steadily for several seconds before she vouchsafed any answer whatever; then she had spoken in her grimmest tone.

"I commonly wear clothes at home, and I presume I shall when I go to town."

He could not resist a laugh at his own expense, but he tried again.

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

"So do the women in town, I assure you ; stunning ones ! Our Commencement week is quite the fashion. The elegantly dressed ladies will be out in full force, with very much decorated costumes and long trains. Aren't you afraid you will feel a bit uncomfortable with a dress as short as you generally wear yours ?"

"I don't know why I should, I am sure. According to your story I shall be the only comfortable person there. At least I shall not have a yard or two of superfluous cloth tagging after me for other people to step on. I shouldn't wonder if I might add to the comfort of some of them by giving them one sensible woman to look at."

"And they wear gloves," said her nephew, desperately ; not because he felt that it would be of any use to discuss the subject, but because, having started it, one must say something, and he did not see his way out.

"White gloves are worn in the evening, Aunt Hannah, long-wristed ones." He began to feel a wicked desire to point the contrast between her appearance and that of the fashionable world.

There was absolute composure in her response.

"Gloves? well, I always wear white cotton gloves when I'm working in the garden, because they wash easier than colored ones do ; and they've got pretty long wrists, too,—I made

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

them out of stocking legs. But I never felt any call to wear them to town."

The case was hopeless. He told himself gloomily that he had known it from the first.

Instead of spending that entire next day in the country as he planned, giving himself generously to his Aunt Hannah's pleasure, he was, as has been said, taking a train back to town, in order to think over his problem in solitude, and reach some decision if possible as to his line of action. Which is why he was pacing the platform of the little station, gloomy faced, and with those unbecoming wrinkles on his forehead.

When the train finally slowed up for him, he stalked gloomily into a car, dropped himself into the first vacant seat, drew down a shade almost savagely with a feeling that the glow of sunshine did not harmonize with his mood, drew his soft hat well over his eyes, and, fixing himself as if for a nap, gave free rein to his imagination and created a scene for his further discomfort.

He put the main reception room of the college in festive array, lighting it brilliantly and arranging with cruel insistence a charming background of color to meet and help set off to advantage the costumes that he presently allowed to come flowing in, as he gathered the very cream of the social world to honor the occasion.

Nor did he forget to make the girl graduates conspicuous among the throngs, not alone because of their class colors, but because he well knew that every white-robed maiden among them would be arrayed in a gown befitting the rare occasion.

He saw them all as a bewildering whole, but promptly his keen eyes singled out from among the groups one so beautiful, so graceful, so superior in every way to all others, that every eye must needs be watching her. For himself, he knew, poor fellow! that he should have eyes only for her.

Yes, for her and one other. He saw himself bringing forward to be presented to this radiant creature, a strong-minded elderly woman in a very short queer black dress and very thick strong boots, whom he must acknowledge as "My Aunt Hannah"!

Could he do it? Put away all thoughts of self? Give up all the dim delicious hopes that he had dared at times to indulge in connection with that vision of grace and beauty, and boldly acknowledge his plebeian origin, his humble connections, thus confessing and emphasizing his utter unfitness for associating with the jewel whose very setting was royal?

Following out this train of thought, he jammed his hat still more over his face and told himself angrily that the painful experience would serve him right for imagining even for a

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

moment that a girl of such exquisite grace, such unusual culture, such manifest environment as must have been hers all her life, could ever think of him with other thoughts than pity for his narrower sphere.

While he was about it, however, he went to the depths of self-humiliation. He allowed himself to be presented to the fair and gracious woman who had the honor of calling that lovely vision "daughter." A woman who wore her robes, as indeed her daughter did, like a queen, and who showed in the very poise of her body the superiority of her birth and surroundings. Nay, he even watched her dignified father, a prince among men, looking down with fond fatherly eyes on his royal daughter, and feeling that she did him credit. And then he made himself bring Aunt Hannah to be introduced to these magnificent personages! Aunt Hannah who, he was sure, would not shrink from meeting royalty itself, and would feel herself in every sense its equal.

"And she is!" groaned this much beset young man. "She is a royal soul; no one believes it more thoroughly than I. I would despise the woman who laughed at her, and knock down the man who dared to sneer, even though he were *her* father, provided they could meet under reasonable conditions. But in that reception room, with hundreds of fashionable women, some of them merely creatures of fash-

ion, and with hundreds of gay college boys to stare, and comment, and laugh!" Oh! even for Aunt Hannah's own sake, how was it to be endured?

Back of every other thought, moaning itself through his inner consciousness like a dismal refrain, was all the time the question: What would SHE, that one for whom all feminine pronouns were made, think of it all?

What could she think, save that he had presumed on her kindness and sought a friendship quite above his own sphere? This thoroughly American young man was sane on all other subjects but the one connected with one rare bit of flesh and blood. He talked no nonsense about "spheres" and "necessary environment"; according with the most democratic among them that in this land, at least, a man's sphere was what he made it, and that environment created no lasting necessities for him; but before one lovely bit of clay all theories having to do with common sense seemed to have lapsed.

"She," he told himself, might even believe that he wanted to secure her friendship simply on account of her social position, that he might, through her, climb! The thought was gall and wormwood.

"As though *I* should care," he told himself, with delicious disregard of the slight that his logic cast upon her, "if her father were a day-

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

laborer, and her mother a washerwoman, so that she was what she is."

Then he tried to put aside visions and give himself to the business of determining his course of action. Might it not be just possible that after the public exercises of Commencement Day were concluded he could smuggle Aunt Hannah away? Or would she insist upon honoring that fatal invitation of his to the evening reception? For one despicable moment the young man considered the possibility of failing to meet the train, and allowing Aunt Hannah to lose herself in the bewilderments of the public functions without ever discovering him, or having herself discovered as connected with him. But this, he was glad afterwards to remember, he put away at once with a sneer for the passing thought, and an assurance that nothing should ever tempt him to such meanness.

It was just then that he became aware of other occupants of the car, and of a remarkable conversation that was being carried on just in front of him.

It had been in progress for some time, but the young man's troubled preoccupied mind had taken no notice of it until a word, a name, indeed, suddenly arrested his attention.

XXVI.

“WHAT’S IN A NAME?”

OCCUPYING the seat just in front of Harlan Kingsbury was a tall, clean-shaven, gray-haired man, dressed in an everyday suit of unmistakably country manufacture. An old-fashioned collar and a necktie belonging in material and make-up to the long ago, as well as every other detail of his dress and appearance, marked the old man as one of that great multitude,—the toilers and breadwinners of our country. His seat companion, with whom he was talking eagerly, wore about him that unmistakable something which marks—and must always mark—the true minister of the gospel who has been long in the service, no matter how carefully he may avoid advertising his profession with clerical dress or mannerisms.

A half-hour before Harlan Kingsbury had boarded the train, the clergyman, grip in hand, had walked leisurely down the length of the fairly well-filled car, scanning the passengers with interested eyes, as if in search of a friend, and had finally halted before the old man’s

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

seat. Other passengers had already looked a second time at that neat old man, whose faded blue eyes had in them such a kindly light. They had noticed his talk with a little child just across the aisle, and had heard ungrammatical phrases occasionally, and words not pronounced in accordance with the latest authority, but they had noticed also sentiments that came evidently from so clear and pure a soul, and from so kind a heart, that instinctively they had been drawn toward him as a man to be trusted.

Perhaps that is what stopped the minister, while the old man made haste to remove his bag, and sit closer into the corner; but the words first spoken were:—

“Unless I am entirely out of my reckoning, this is my old friend and brother, David Ransom.”

There had been a moment of astonished scrutiny on the part of the old man, followed by a sudden lighting up of his expressive face and a volume of eager words.

“Well, if I’m not beat! I b’lieve in my heart that it’s him! My eyes! It don’t seem possible that it’s more than twenty years since I had a look at you, but it is, pastor, and you’re him! I see it plain enough now, when you smile; you can’t ever hide that smile. Well, well! if I ain’t glad to see you! I’ll tell mother that that paid of itself, without another thing. Where you going? And where be you,

anyhow? Set down, pastor, set down, and tell me all about it."

His tone was so eager, so filled with delight, that the passengers all about him, strangers to him and to each other, looked at one another and smiled in sympathy. The minister made haste to take the offered seat. Twenty years, was it, since Ray Prescott had sat in the neat kitchen of the little wind-swept farm and heard David Ransom tell the story of hope deferred in connection with his father's big silver watch?

He went over the headings of the intervening years for David Ransom; and the old man listened and questioned as people do who have been long separated and have heard only vague and general outlines concerning their friends, and for years not even those.

David Ransom had loved the young man, whom he called his pastor, with no common love, and when he said for the third time:—

"My eyes! ain't it good to see you once more?" all his heart went with the words, and the minister, whose hair was plentifully sprinkled with gray, felt his own heart beat warm and strong for this friend of his youth.

"And now, brother Ransom," he said, when the scattered threads of his own story were gathered and tied, "tell me about yourself.

"There is one thing I have thought of a great many times and wished I could hear about. Do you remember that the very last

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

time I saw you, you were going the next day to buy a watch, a 'great big ticker,' like the one your father left for you? Did you get it?"

The old man laid his big toil-roughened hands on his knees, and laughed until he shook the seat, and the people about him laughed in sympathy.

"I did that," he said. "The prettiest and the finest and the most precious watch that ever this world held, I do believe. I carried it home to mother that very afternoon; and I says to her, 'My eyes! what a steady beat it's got!' And it had. I'll never forget how it felt to have it beating away close to my heart."

"And you have kept it all these years?" said the minister, in his sympathetic voice. "And it keeps good time? I would really like to see that watch, brother Ransom. I feel as though I, some way, had a part in its history."

One large worn hand was laid upon his knee, for emphasis, as the loud hearty voice made answer.

"So you shall, pastor; so you shall this very day if you will come with me to where I am going.

"No, I ain't got it with me; it is a sight too precious for me to carry it around all the while. But I'm going to set eyes on it this blessed day! and if you will come along, I'll show it to you with all my heart, and if ever you see a

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

watch in your life equal to it, why, I should like for you to tell me where."

The minister was puzzled.

"But where do you keep it?" he asked. "Why, brother, this is extraordinary! I have always supposed that watches were intended to carry about with us."

David Ransom fairly bent double with laughter. When at last he could speak, he said:—

"Now, I've really got to tell you all about it.

"I went up to the junction all right that very next morning, just as we had planned, and I had the seventeen dollars sewed into my pocket. Mother, she had a feeling that I might be tempted to use it up in some other way, you know. Don't you remember how she charged me not to let anything home or foreign hinder my bringing back that watch? And I promised her she should hear its heart beat that very night.

"Well, you know we had to wait quite a spell at the junction for the express train; and I see a youngish kind of a woman sitting around there a good while. I didn't notice her much; I guess maybe I didn't see her at all until her baby woke up. She was a little mite of a creature, but she had great big eyes and the loveliest kind of a smile. That smile went right straight to my heart, pastor. A stone couldn't

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

hardly have helped smiling back. After a spell the woman asked me to hold the baby while she ran over to the other station, you know, for her bag that she had forgot. And of course I did; and the long and short of it is that she never came back."

"What!" exclaimed the minister. "Deserted her child and left it on your hands? That is monstrous!"

"That's what she did," said David Ransom, gravely. "She may have had sorrowful reasons, poor critter! I've never felt called to blame her too much. She was a sickly looking woman, and there's times when I thought maybe she was taken sick and couldn't get back. It is a great big world, you know, pastor, and accidents happen that you don't hear about."

"That is true. And what did you do with the child? Got her into a Home, I suppose?"

"Yes, I did that! I got her home jest as fast as the next up-train would take me, and put her into mother's arms. And says I: 'There's the watch, mother, sure enough! and I've watched it every blessed minute this afternoon; and she has beat that little heart of hers regular, against mine, the whole time; and she's kep' her little fist tight hold of my thumb with a grip that I can't ever get away from.' And I never did, pastor, never."

"You kept her!" said the minister. "And brought her up? This is an extraordinary

story! Then you have two daughters? What did Mrs. Ransom say to this one?"

"Well, pastor, at first she didn't say a word. I kind of think that for about one minute she was troubled over the other watch. But she took the little thing into her arms and heard its little heart beat, and she cuddled it, as mothers do, you know, and listened to its little story, and after we had got the baby to bed all nice and comfortable, and she had smiled that wonderful smile of hers at mother, and gone to sleep in her arms, she says to me in her gentle quiet way,—you remember mother's way, don't you?—'Father,' says she, 'we are poor, and we have hard work to make the ends come together sometimes, and seventeen dollars won't go very far towards keeping a watch like this beating; but after all, if Providence had given us a little girl of our very own we would have took care of her, wouldn't we?' 'That we would,' says I, and I spoke up right quick, for me. 'We wouldn't have heard a word about her going to any Home except the one that this baby is in this minute; and we'd have trusted Providence to show us how to make the ends meet, just as He always has done, wouldn't we?' And mother agreed, and so we did it.

"And Providence did His part, too, pastor. It is a curious thing, I don't pretend to understand it, I'm content with just knowing it;

that there little Watch of ours had no sooner got inside the door than it seemed as though things began to look up with us. I never had such crops in my life as came that year. And ever since, pastor, we've been prospered in about everything we undertook. We haven't ever seen the time when we've been what you may call troubled to get whatever was needed for the child; and the older she grew the more she needed, of course. Some years I'll own that I felt almost scared the way things went. And it was curious, too, about the missionary money. She was kind of home and Foreign both, don't you see? She didn't belong to us, at the very first, you know, and then she did. And so, mother and I said it was Foreign and home, again,—mother and father both in it. You remember, don't you, how interested father was in Foreign missions, and mother kind of leaned toward home, and my wife and I had always tried to put them together? Well, we thought we ought to make our gift for them both a little bigger each year, because the child certainly grew into a bigger blessing every year of her life, and we worried ahead, a little, at first, for fear we couldn't always do it; but we got over that, for we ain't missed a year!

“Take this year now, we've had extra expenses you may say right along, and, on the other hand, the child has been the biggest kind of a blessing to us this very year. It was only

last month I says to mother, 'If I didn't know better, I should be afraid that we should have to let up a little on our thankoffering this year;' and mother says, 'There couldn't be a worse year for it; money is needed more than ever, and we've never in our lives had bigger causes for thanksgiving.' And, pastor, the very next week there come along a man and paid me a debt that I'd never expected to get, and 'most forgot, and interest, too! What do you think of that?"

"It is a wonderful story," said the minister, smiling over the fact that the old man's voice had kept growing louder in his excitement until his neighbors on either side were hearing and enjoying.

"It is a wonderful story, brother. He is a safe One to trust, isn't He? So you have brought up two daughters, eh? Is this one with you at home? By the way, what is her name?"

"I haven't but one daughter, pastor. Providence never gave us only this one, and she is in college, you know."

"What! is my little star scholar the daughter about whom you have been telling me? Why, brother Ransom, I have always supposed that she was your very own."

"So she is," said David Ransom, firmly. "So she is; there never was a father and mother that more truly had a daughter than we have; but we never had but the one."

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

"This is extraordinary!" said the minister. "But now, do you know that I haven't the child's name? If you mentioned it, in writing, it has slipped my mind; you had a habit of saying 'the child,' you know; and she in writing to me signed only an initial. I was thinking but this morning before I met you that it was absurd in me not to have learned her full name."

"Why, pastor, I've been telling you her name all along! It's Watch, just *Watch*. That's all the name we give her; she didn't need any other. Seems as though she was father's present to me all the time, don't you see? Our little Watch. I was hankering for a silver one, you know, and Providence gave me one that was pure gold; and just as much mother's as mine; which made it a great deal better from the first, you see."

"Why, this," said the minister, "is perfectly astounding me! You don't mean to say that my little college friend never had any other name than that! What an extraordinary idea! Does she like the name? By the way, does she know her own story? Brother Ransom, I'm simply bristling with questions."

David Ransom gravely gave himself to their answering.

"Well, pastor, at first I kind of think she didn't exactly like the name. She didn't say so, but we had a feeling that she didn't, and it

troubled us some. You see there were two or three boys in the neighborhood that teased her about it. But after a spell, she got to loving it, and said she wouldn't have any other name for anything. Oh, yes, she knows all that we do about her early life. At first we thought we wouldn't tell her, but before we knew it some of the neighbors had done it for us, — let it out, you know, without really meaning to, and there was a few days when I think she had some unhappy feelings because we were not what she called her 'truly' father and mother. But one day, along with one of her Sunday-school cards, she made up the explanation that suited her. The card had this verse on it: 'When my father and mother forsake me, then the Lord will take me up,' and she came to me with her face very still, and climbed on my knee, and says she: 'Father, I've thought it all out. You are the father and mother is the mother that the Lord picked out for me, after He took me up. Isn't that the way it is?' And she kissed me, pastor, right over both my eyes in a queer grave little way she had. I guess there was tears in 'em; her voice sounded so kind of sad and sweet that I couldn't keep 'em back. But I told her that I believed that was just exactly the way it was. And then she says: 'And you call me "Watch" so as to let the dear Lord know that you were going to keep watch of me all the time, for Him; didn't you? And now I shall like my

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

name forever and ever,' says she, in a grave sweet way she had. And I reckon she has.

"It appears to me that is pretty good theology, ain't it? Anyhow, it suited us. And we've been happy ever since, mother and me, and our little Watch."

It was at the moment when David Ransom first spoke this singular name that the young man in the seat behind him sat erect, pushed his hat back from before his face, and stared with a half-bewildered, wholly annoyed expression at the kindly faced old man. What in the world was he talking about?

XXVII.

WASTED SYMPATHY.

“**W**ATCH!” Could it be possible that the earth contained more than one young woman who answered to that name?

It was a name that at first he had shrunk from and been angry over.

“As though she were a mere animal!” he had told himself in a fume, “instead of being the most perfect creation that ever breathed earthly air!”

Then, by degrees, he had grown into a liking for the name, letting it linger tenderly on his lips when he was quite alone, trying its effect with his voice toned to different cadences. He tried to arrange from it a pet name that should suit his thought of the girl, and failed. So had her college classmates, apparently. Either they disliked or else revered her name; they used it sparingly; and with the ready invention of schoolgirls coined a pet name for her, — “Queen” at first, and then “Queenie.”

The young man had been glad. He told

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

himself that the girl's real name was unique, like herself; was set apart and would not be toyed with. And, having grown jealous of its sound on other lips than his, he rejoiced over that pet name, "Queen," and felt its appropriateness; certainly she was their queen.

His jealousy grew fierce, grew absurd. He wished with all his soul that the girl's parents had given her another name for common use; and that he might some day arrange it so that that sweet grave name which so exactly fitted her should be for him, and him alone.

And here, to-day, was this common farmer, a coarse illiterate man, using it freely for some woman to whom he claimed to have given it! In his excitement this seemed to the young man impudence, almost sacrilege! He felt that he would like to horsewhip the stranger!

It was then that he sat erect and turned fierce eyes in the direction of the offender, and instantly toned down his adjectives. Not coarse, nor common. Illiterate in a sense, he might be called, and commonplace, as to his clothes, but no one who could lay the slightest claim to a knowledge of human nature, or who had a pure enough heart to be instinctively drawn toward purity, would ever for a moment apply the word "coarse" to a face like David Ransom's.

It was not in human nature to refrain from listening to the conversation now, especially as

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

the two deeply interested talkers seemed to be indifferent as to who heard them.

The younger man stormed his old friend with questions, the answers to which set the guilty listener's pulses to throbbing like imprisoned engines.

"And so she is actually the 'watch' you have been talking to me about all the time!" said the minister, who seemed unable to find words to express his astonishment.

"Did you ever buy the other one?"

"No, pastor, I never did. You see our pure gold watch needed a good deal more care than a common man-made affair would have done; and though, as I told you, we have prospered, right along, we have never seen the time that we wanted to spare money for jest a silver watch."

There was almost contempt in the old man's voice at thought of the contrast. Then he began in another tone.

"There's one thing I didn't tell you. She brought along her father's watch, and it was the very image of my father's; as like as two peas in a pod."

"Who brought it, brother Ransom?"

"*She* did, the baby. It was sewed up in her little petticoat, a big old silver watch. It always made us feel kind of tender toward that poor mother. We took it that the father had died, and the poor mother was in straits and

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

felt that she was going, too, before long, and made up her mind to give away her baby to the one that Providence would find for her; and she took the watch along for the child to have something of the father's to keep. Of course we shan't ever know whether that's the right of it, but mother and me think it is."

"If you are right," said the minister, "I hope the poor mother has some way of knowing into whose hands her baby fell. Well now, brother, I have some news for you. I'm on my way to see this wonderful Watch of yours, the gold one, I mean. You didn't imagine that, did you? I mean I had started for it before you invited me to go with you."

"You had!" said David Ransom, delight in his voice. "Ain't that queer, now? I told you I was going, didn't I? This is a great day with me. I was sitting here being so tickled over it all when you come in that I could hardly keep from laughing.

"I reckon there will be about the surprisedest girl this afternoon that can be found from Maine to California. You see, she ain't expecting of me; and I wasn't expecting of myself. Fact is, this is mother's doings,—the whole of it. She got it all up of herself to surprise us both, and sent me off. Yes, sir, Watch is going to graduate this very week. You see it is what they call their Commencement week. Queer name, ain't it? I should think they

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

would call it 'Ending,' but it seems them scholars turn things upside down, and say 'Commencement,' when they are just getting done. She belongs to the class that has gone through their course, and there isn't one among 'em that has done any better than she did. I've got a letter from the President of the college, don't you think! and he said so himself.

"And I'm to be there to see her; that's the greatest! She is to be all in white, and she'll look like a lily among 'em. She'll do you credit, pastor. Do you mean that you are going to the meeting?"

"I believe I am." The minister drew from his pocket a booklet containing the announcements of Commencement week, and called his companion's attention to his own name announced as speaker.

"My eyes!" said David Ransom. "There it is, sure enough, and I never saw it. The fact is, pastor, I hadn't eyes for any name but hers. You see I didn't expect to know any of the others, and never looked at them; and Watch hasn't written us a word."

"It was a very late decision," said the minister. "I expected to have to disappoint them, and I had to telegraph them finally at the last moment; so your daughter probably has not known until very lately that I was to be there. It had a great deal to do with my final decision, the hope of meeting her, but little did I think

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

that I was to have the honor of seeing my dear old friend also."

Long before this, the guilty listener behind them knew the name of the college about which they were talking; knew it quite as well as he did when he stole a glance at their programme, for confirmation. This man in front of him was the distinguished preacher that they had had such difficulty in securing. Yesterday, he would have felt honored to be a fellow-traveller of his, and would have listened eagerly to his words. To-day, in the face of the tremendous discoveries he was making, the Commencement orator was of smallest consequence. He was sitting behind Watch Ransom's father!

What now had become of that wonderful father and mother whom he had so many times pictured that their visions flashed before his mental gaze the instant he thought of them? Could imagination have conjured a greater contrast than the facts presented?

Suddenly a great wave of sympathy overwhelmed him. Miss Ransom was to be surprised; she had no idea that her father was coming. From the talk that still flowed on, he gathered that the two men meant to go directly from the train to the college. They both knew of the class function which was set for that afternoon, and from which he had excused himself because it was the only day that he could give to his Aunt Hannah. They would

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

find Miss Ransom in the large reception room, surrounded not only by her classmates, but by distinguished ladies and gentlemen who had accepted invitations for that function; and this old man would crowd his way toward her and before all that array of culture and fashion call her "Daughter." Surely that was far worse than his own coming ordeal with Aunt Hannah! Wait! couldn't he help her? If he could reach the rooms first, and get speech with her, and give her a little hint of what was coming, at least she would not be so taken by surprise. Perhaps he could invent a reason for calling her into one of the small rooms to wait there for her friends.

The train was already slowing up for the down-town station. He looked eagerly at his watch. It was late; but if those dreadful men would decide to walk, he could take a carriage and head them off. No, they were commenting on the lateness of the hour, and the minister was saying they would drive at once to the college. There was a certain man whom he wanted to see before the reception closed. Well, Harlan Kingsbury knew the most direct route, and just which way to turn when he reached the building; he might be able to accomplish it. At least it was worth a trial.

He made a dash for the platform, and at risk of life and limb swung himself to the ground before the train had stopped.

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

Alas for his hopes! The short cut that he chose was blocked for half a mile. It was in vain for him to fume, and hold his watch in his hand, and promise the driver extra half dollars.

"That's all right, young man," he said in calm sarcasm. "But you see I can't drive over the heads of this crowd. If I should, there would be a bigger mess than there is now, and you likely wouldn't get there at all."

"I might as well not," Harlan muttered, when at last his carriage drew up before the reception hall. For there, just ahead of him, was the old farmer stepping briskly from a carriage and following a man who evidently knew his way.

Harlan Kingsbury was too late. He made all speed to the reception room, not even waiting to brush the dust of travel from his garments, but neither did the other travellers. Just as he caught sight of Miss Ransom, the central figure of a prominent group, — she was always a central figure, — he saw the face of the old man from his station near one of the entrance doors, and knew that he had seen her also. But the young man pushed his way to the front. Since he could not warn her, at least he would stand as near to her as possible and watch his chance to show that he appreciated her embarrassment, and sympathized with her to the utmost.

At last she saw him. Was there a sudden

gleam of pleasure in those expressive eyes of hers? He did not know. Certainly her greeting was prompt and cordial.

"Ah, Mr. Kingsbury! this is an unexpected pleasure. Did not I hear that you had eschewed the pomps and vanities of this occasion in favor of the country?"

He was unaccountably confused. He had not remembered that he must make an excuse for being there at all. He stammered a reply to the effect that force of habit long indulged had drawn him unerringly back to college functions.

She began to rally him upon this apparently lame excuse, and to ask what he meant to do with such habits for the future. Would he be likely to find college functions where — And then she stopped abruptly, and caught her breath with a little exclamation, and then — the fairest light that he had ever seen even on her face transfigured it, and her voice, vibrating with exquisite joy, rose clear and strong!

"Oh! *father!*" And the next moment the old-fashioned farmer had her in his arms, and his tremulous voice was saying gently — in the sudden hush that followed: —

"Father's little Watch."

Harlan Kingsbury remained until the reception was over. He was not very social; the young ladies who knew him best and liked best to talk with him murmured in strictest

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

confidence their opinion of his worth that afternoon.

"Mr. Kingsbury is no better than a post! He has neither eyes nor ears for any one but Queen."

It was true. He watched her steadily moving among the crowds, her hand resting lightly on the sleeve of that well-worn, carefully preserved coat, and listened like one fascinated to the voice that said gleefully to a special friend:—

"Now I will introduce you to the dearest father in the world; no, I will not even except yours; he may come just next."

Suddenly he heard the old man say:—

"Hold on, darling, I'm forgetting. You don't know who else is here. Oh, yes, you do; but I didn't. You haven't seen him, though. Where is he?"

He raised his voice and beckoned with his hand.

"Come over here, pastor; here's my little Watch that I promised to show you."

They laughed with him, not at him. Young Kingsbury, watching jealously, ready to be fierce on the slightest provocation, saw that they all, the society ladies and the gayest college boys, were in hearty sympathy with the pure-faced old man who claimed the idol of the class as his daughter.

It might have helped, perhaps, when they discovered that the Rev. Dr. Prescott, whose

fame they fully realized, was on such evident terms of close friendship, not only with the daughter, but with her quaint old father. But not one of them gave a hint that they needed help of this sort. Not the wildest boy among them apparently cared to make so much as a pun at the expense of the old man.

At the close of the afternoon, the young man went to his room to consider the fact that clothes, and culture, and even education, were not all of life; that true nobility could be recognized at least by some people, despite the disguise of poverty and its accompanying limitations. Also, that some rare souls, of whom Watch Ransom was assuredly one, lived on a plane above the possibility of embarrassments and the need of sympathy for such experiences as these.

XXVIII.

FOREIGN, AND HOME.

WHEN the next morning's Eastern express rolled into the down-town station, Harlan Kingsbury was the first person on whom Miss Hannah's eyes rested as she came briskly to the platform, her serviceable bag that had been on duty for forty years in one hand, and her serviceable cotton umbrella, without which she never went abroad, in the other.

The young man possessed himself of both, boldly kissed his aunt in the presence of three college girls, who were watching him, and escorted her to a carriage through a cordon of college men who were waiting for friends.

Throughout that memorable day his attention to the singular-looking old lady never once faltered. He had secured for her one of the best seats in the great building where the Commencement exercises were to be held, and seated himself beside her ready to give information upon all points that might interest her. So far had he gotten away from the mood of but the day before, that the curious eyes levelled

at him and his companion from all parts of the house did not even annoy him. He had never felt more indifferent to public opinion in his life. There was but one person in the world, and what she would think and feel he believed that he knew. When he recurred to his panic of the day before, it brought a sneer of self-contempt upon him, as he asked himself how it was possible that he could have been such a fool. He bent over his aunt in eager fashion to give her items of interest, then looked about him with the air of one who would like to say: "This queer-looking old country woman is my Aunt Hannah who brought me up, and I don't care how soon you all understand it."

Truth to tell, the young man's heart was dancing for joy over an added bond of sympathy that he felt sure there would be between him and that other one who made his world. He felt it again when, as the graduating procession was filing in, he saw her take advantage of a momentary block in the aisle, to step out of line and whisper and smile a greeting to her eager-faced old father who occupied a conspicuous seat. Then his expressive face clouded for a moment. It was over this thought: Need she ever be told what a fool he had almost made of himself?

When the orator for the day was announced, Harlan Kingsbury felt his aunt give a little start,

and cover an exclamation while she looked at the programme which she had heretofore held in her hand without examination. He bent over her.

"I forgot to tell you, Aunt Hannah, that the speaker is my old friend Bert Crozier's uncle; the one who educated him. Didn't you tell me once that you used to know him?"

Miss Sterns nodded. "It was a long while ago," she said.

"But you will like to meet him?" The young man's voice was actually eager; he felt just then as though he would like to introduce Aunt Hannah to all the celebrities in the world.

His exalted mood lasted throughout the day, and if Aunt Hannah had expressed a desire to dine with the college president, it is not certain that he would not have tried to gratify her. He seemed to himself to be making atonement for thoughts.

He took his aunt to the most fashionable restaurant in the city, and indulged in all sorts of extravagant dishes for their belated dinner. He gave what was left of the afternoon to driving with her to various points of interest, and, appearing to her at night in all the glory of full dress, made the tour of the reception rooms with her hand resting on his arm, though even to Miss Sterns herself her black alpaca had never seemed so short and scant, or her strong farm boots so stout.

He introduced her to everybody, to the

president of the college as well as to Judge Hanley, the president of the Board of Trustees. This of course was not so bad as presenting her to some of the ladies, for she had received two personal letters from the college president, and she conversed not only with him but with other members of the faculty with such intelligence that her nephew felt there was no occasion to blush for her brains.

He was not prepared, however, for the effect of Miss Ransom upon her. At that lovely creation of white drapery she stared, not simply in admiration of her beauty, but evidently struggling with a bewildering memory.

Nothing could have been more winsome than Miss Ransom's manner to her; she was evidently making an earnest effort to put what she must have thought was an embarrassed old woman at her ease.

Suddenly Aunt Hannah exclaimed:—

"Why, you are the girl who prayed!"

Rich waves of color rolled over Miss Ransom's face, and Harlan Kingsbury, feeling that his aunt must suddenly have gone insane, began an astonished:—

"Aunt Hannah!"

When Miss Ransom spoke.

"Oh, are you?—yes, you are the friend who was so kind to that poor man. I remember you now, perfectly. How strange that we should meet again! I am glad. I was inter-

ested in that man, and thought I should like to hear more of him. Wasn't it sad that he should die there, alone, away from all his friends? He had friends, had he not?"

"Not that we have been able to find," said Miss Sterns, still studying the girl's face with a puzzled look on her own that Harlan, who felt left out of this mystery, could not understand. Where had his aunt and Watch Ransom met before?

"Oh," the girl said, "doesn't that seem too sad! Did he give no one any clew to his friends? Do you know, Miss Sterns, I am singularly interested in that man? It is one of the hospital patients," she explained in answer to Harlan's look. "I sang for him one day, the day he died, and your aunt was there. Miss Sterns, I do not suppose there could be two people more unlike than that man and my father, and yet there was something about his face that made me think of father. I wonder if you would notice it? Where is my father? Mr. Kingsbury, I want your aunt to meet him."

Said Harlan, "Mr. Ransom is over near the middle arch talking with Dr. Prescott, and he, by the way, is an old acquaintance of my aunt; if you will wait here, I will bring them both."

But Harlan Kingsbury, although he believed that he knew his Aunt Hannah very well, and was keyed up to a sufficiently exalted frame of

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

mind to endure anything, was not prepared for the eccentricities she was exhibiting that evening.

"Wait!" she said eagerly, a restraining hand on his arm; "don't go yet. Don't go at all; I'm not ready. Did you say it was Mr. Ransom? Did you use that name?"

"Yes," said the girl, in gentle wonderment. "That is what he called my father. I am Watch Ransom."

"And did you, that is — child, your father's name isn't David, is it?"

"Why, yes," said Watch Ransom, smiling soothingly on her, "that is my father's name, David Bennett Ransom. Have you known some person by that name?"

Said that bewildering Aunt Hannah: —

"Never mind. I can't explain now, child; I must see your father, though, and ask some questions; but this isn't the place, I suppose. When could I see him? Couldn't he come, and you, too, out to the farm to-morrow and visit me?"

"Aunt Hannah!" said Harlan Kingsbury, his face ablaze, but she laid her hand again on his arm.

"Harlan, be still; you don't know what I am talking about; but I do, and I must find out. If you can't come to-morrow, when can you?"

At that moment came a diversion. Dr. Pres-

cott, who had caught sight of the girl in whom he was chiefly interested, in company with the young man whom he had met as his nephew's friend, now laid a cordial hand on Harlan's shoulder as he said: —

"Good evening again." And before any introductions could be made, Miss Sterns interposed.

"How do you do, Ray?" she said, holding out her large ungloved hand. "I should have known you anywhere, but I don't expect you to say the same of me."

Dr. Prescott cordially grasped the offered hand, but gazed, evidently puzzled. Then a sudden light breaking over his face: —

"Can it be possible that this is —"

"Hannah Sterns," she interrupted hurriedly. "That's my name; I don't wonder in the least that you have forgotten me. It is a long time, and women always change more than men do. Besides, I saw you this morning. We were old friends, Harlan, before you were born, so of course we don't have to wait for introductions. Can't we sit down, somewhere? I want to have a talk with you."

Whatever it was that had disturbed Miss Hannah, she had recovered her self-possession and was much the least bewildered of the group.

Harlan made haste to carry out her suggestion and find seats at least for Dr. Prescott and his aunt. Then he turned to Miss Ransom to

make what apology he could for his aunt's strange conduct.

"She has been stirred by some experience of long ago," said the girl, sympathetically. "Mr. Kingsbury, what must it be to go backward in memory over half a century? I should like to know more about that man at the hospital. Your aunt was very good to him. The nurse told me that his young wife had been employed in your aunt's house, and that because there was no one else to care for him she opened the family burial-place to receive him. That is not like many people, is it? But I understand it, because it is like my father and mother."

Then Harlan Kingsbury recalled that funeral scene at which he had officiated, and felt a keen added interest as he realized that this girl was in some way connected with the experience. What had his Aunt Hannah meant when she said, "You are the girl who prayed"?

As for Miss Sterns, she wasted no time.

"Do you know that girl's father?" she began abruptly as soon as the young people had turned away. "She says his name is David. What do you know about him? Did he have a brother that you know of, and was his name Benjamin?"

"He had a brother," said Dr. Prescott, "and lost sight of him many years ago. It was before I knew you, Hannah, that I was intimate with David Ransom. Now that you

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

“speak of it, I think the brother's name was Benjamin. I am almost certain that he used to talk of ‘Ben.’”

There was a curious quiver of excitement strangely mingled with pain in Miss Sterns's voice as she asked her next question almost tremulously.

“Did he — did Dave ever get his watch, do you know?”

“His watch!” echoed Dr. Prescott, his face betraying the bewilderment he felt.

“Yes, his father's watch that he lent to his brother.”

“Hannah, how do you know all this? There is a very strange story connected with that watch.”

“No matter how I know, just now; help me if you can. Is this girl his only child? She says her name is Watch Ransom. — What did he mean by giving her such a name as that?”

“She is David Ransom's adopted child. And she brought with her when she came to him a silver watch sewed into her little garments. He does not know her parentage, nor her history in any way save that he saw the poor mother for a few minutes; and she went away and left her child with him.”

“His adopted child!” said Miss Sterns, in an awe-stricken voice. “Then God let her take her own father up to the very door of the other

world in a prayer that was different from any other that I ever heard! That is wonderful! 'His ways are past finding out.' "

Miss Sterns went home that night by the late train, as she had promised Miranda that she would; and her bewildered nephew went with her, having heard Dr. Prescott promise her to come out to the farm by the morning express and bring David Ransom and his daughter. There was nothing that Harlan Kingsbury longed for quite so much as a private interview with his Aunt Hannah, to learn if possible the solution to this series of puzzles.

Miss Sterns had been through many strange experiences that day, but she had herself well in hand and spoke in her usual brisk tones.

"I guess it is all right, Harlan. She is by all odds the handsomest one there, and the best dressed, and she looks as though she had the most sense. She knows a man from a puppy, even when he has an aunt that wears old-fashioned short dresses and thick boots. I don't mind your liking her better than any one else; I think you show your good sense in doing it."

"Aunt Hannah," said the young man, his face burning red even under cover of the darkness, "what in the world are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about that girl that you like the best of any one in the world, and that you were afraid to have see me for fear I should set her

against you. Foolish boy! If she hadn't had more brains than that, would you have wanted her for a wife? You wonder how I know so much, I suppose, but I haven't studied your ways for more than twenty years without learning them. I knew it was one of those young women, and I wanted to find out which one, and I did, in about five minutes. Now you think I've got a long story to tell, and I have. But I can't tell it to-night; I've been through enough for one day. Besides, some of it might as well be told once for all, when we get together to-morrow. Still, I oughtn't to keep you wondering all night, so I'll just put the main points into a dozen words and leave the rest for to-morrow. That man we buried in our lot is David Ransom's brother whom I used to know when I was young; and he is the father of this girl, Watch Ransom. She didn't know it when she sang and prayed him just as far on his last journey as she could go; and I didn't either, but I've found it out; and naturally she and David Ransom will like to hear all that I can tell. There is a part to it, Harlan, that doesn't especially belong to the story and needn't be talked about, but I may as well tell you that I expected at one time in my life to be Benjamin Ransom's wife, and perhaps you can understand that I would have some interest in a child of his. Now don't let us talk about it any more to-night; I'm as near

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

tuckered out as I often get. To-morrow I'll answer the thousand-and-one questions that you want to ask if I can. But just now all I want to say is that I understand, better than I did yesterday, what sort of an ordeal I've given you to-day; and while I'm proud of you clear to the backbone, and kind of glad that I've proved once more the stuff you are made of, still, I don't see any call to make things any harder for you than they naturally must be, and I shan't do it again. There! don't talk."

There was no chance; their carriage drew up at the railway station, and the excited and bewildered and distressed and happy young man who had opened his lips to speak closed them again, but before he helped Aunt Hannah from the carriage, he leaned over and kissed her twice, as a son might kiss his mother.

It was on a June day in the following summer that there was a pretty wedding in the white room of the little wind-swept farm-house. David Ransom's friend, who during all the intervening years he had lovingly called "pastor," travelled a thousand miles and more for the privilege of performing the ceremony that made Watch Ransom and Harlan Kingsbury husband and wife.

Of course Aunt Hannah was there, and she wore on the wedding-day a gray silk gown that lay, at least, three inches on the floor, and with

soft, rare, old laces, family heirlooms, at throat and wrists, and with her white hair slightly waved and done in graceful bands by the bride elect, and with a spray of white roses with delicate pinky hearts at her breast, placed there by her boy, Harlan, she looked for all the world like some brave old-fashioned flower that had chosen the autumn for blooming.

"I didn't feel any call," she said, "to make it harder for the children than need be."

One bit of sentiment unexpected and appreciated merrily, especially by Harlan Kingsbury, came to them through Miranda. Aunt Hannah told them the story and told it well.

It was on the evening before she and her nephew started westward that Miranda lingered after she had performed all imaginable kind offices for her mistress, and finally, after several clearings of her throat and beginnings of sentences that ended abruptly and said nothing, she began:—

"I should like to see Mr. Harlan married, Miss Hannah; you know what he has always been to me." When Miss Hannah opened her lips to reply, Miranda forestalled her. "Yes, I know you gave me the chance, and urged it, and so did Mr. Harlan; I shall not be likely to forget that, ever; but there was reasons why I couldn't do that. But we felt, Josiah and me, as though we would like to celebrate the day, someday; it beats all how

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

much Josiah thinks of Mr. Harlan, though he hasn't known him as we have, of course; but he's attached, wonderful for a man; and as for you, Miss Hannah, — well, I guess you know what store he sets by you; he shows that by the way he does for you. Well, I'm making a long story of it, but the fact is Josiah and I have planned a little celebration if you don't think the bride and groom will mind. We have planned that at the very identical hour and minute that Dr. Prescott says the words that make Mr. Harlan a married man, we'll get married ourselves, Jonas and me, in the dining room. It won't make any kind of difference in the arrangements, of course; we'll stay right on here and take care of everything the best we can, just as we have always done, but that is the way we would like to celebrate."

Never was there a more astonished mistress than Miss Hannah, but never was more cordial consent given to a marriage. Miss Hannah only stipulated that the ceremony should be performed in the great parlor that, so many years before, had been given up to good cheer, and that Miranda and Jonas should have in certain of their old friends to rejoice with them. Nor did she forget to be generous and substantial in her wedding-gift.

It was Harlan saying, just after he kissed his bride and his Aunt Hannah, "Now I should like to kiss Mrs. Jonas Perkins," that turned

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

back the current of a few tears and made them all laugh instead. David Ransom, after he had kissed the bride three times and brushed the tears from his eyes to laugh over the thought of that other bride, and kissed "mother" surreptitiously to get to quiet natural ground again, beamed on the minister and said:—

"It ain't often, pastor, that things get as mixed as they are to-day. I used to think that it was the bride and groom that got all the presents. But just you look at this."

As he spoke, he drew from its pocket a large old-fashioned silver watch that was ticking loudly.

"There it is," he said proudly, "father's watch; I've got it at last, and it is doubly dear to me now, of course. The old works wore out, pastor, but my son had bran' new ones put in, and he says it is good now for two generations, and it is the same dear old case that father and Ben both handled. Ain't the ways of Providence wonderful? Our son says it is an exchange for the pure gold Watch that we have given him to-day; to help comfort mother and me. I don't deny that it is a great comfort to have it, but it is a terrible change from our little gold one, after all."

The old man's lips quivered despite his brave struggle after a smile, but the minister's cheery voice took up the word.

"You don't need comfort, brother Ransom.

DAVID RANSOM'S WATCH.

It will be a beautiful reminder of all your blessings, and it is grand that you have it; but 'comfort,' man alive, honors are just heaped upon you. What did you tell me about your father and mother, and their deep interest in the two divisions of the Lord's work, and see how you have united them in your Watch!"

A rare light broke over the sweet old face, and his voice rose jubilant.

"That's so, pastor, that's so, as sure as the world. I never see it in just that light before. Our little Watch is Home, that's certain; she's the very heart and soul of home to mother and me; and now he is going to take her to the Foreign field for a while, so father can have his share; that's beautiful. And by and by there won't be any more 'Foreign,' will there, because they'll be gathered in? Won't that be a reunion worth having when we all get home together, and the things that have puzzled and troubled us here are set right and made plain? And then to think that we shall 'go out no more forever'! Thank you, pastor, thank you."

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